

## ABSTRACT

Title of dissertation: DECORATING THE HOUSE OF WISDOM:  
FOUR ALTARPIECES FROM THE CHURCH OF  
SANTO SPIRITO IN FLORENCE (1485-1500)

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This dissertation examines four altarpieces by different artists painted between 1485 and 1500 for Santo Spirito, the church of the Augustinian Hermits in Florence, in light of the Hermits' influence on the paintings' iconography. I argue that each of the altarpieces expresses a distinct set of Augustinian values and suggests appropriate modes of devotion and praxis. Together, the paintings represent an attempt on the part of the Florentine Hermits to convey their institutional and religious identity as heirs to Augustine's spirituality.

The first chapter reviews the history and thought of the Augustinian Hermits, the history of the convent of Santo Spirito and the building and decoration of its church. The second concerns Sandro Botticelli's 1485 Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints John the Baptist and John the Evangelist, which displays a nursing Virgin in a garden of scriptural quotations. The altarpiece portrays Holy Wisdom as the garden of Ecclesiasticus 24, as the Virgin immaculate created before all things, and, most importantly, as the Christ Child whose engorged breasts feed mankind. The third chapter addresses Piero di Cosimo's 1490-1498 Visitation with Saints Nicholas of Bari and

Anthony Abbot. Mary and Elizabeth's *unctio dextrarum* seals, under the impression of the Holy Spirit, the union of the Testaments and the unity and authority of *Ecclesia* and accomplishes the "kiss of Justice and Peace" of Psalm 84. The third chapter discusses Filippino Lippi's 1494 Madonna and Child with Saints Martin of Tours, Catherine of Alexandria, the Young Saint John the Baptist and Donors: Within a multilayered composition based on Augustine's City of God, the donors apply to familial relationships the model of Saint Martin's charity displayed in the chapel window. Finally, Agnolo del Mazziere's 1495-1500 Trinity with Saints Mary Magdalene and Catherine of Alexandria, discusses ways of seeing and imaging the Trinity in light of Augustine's De Trinitate. My close reading of these altarpieces and my focus on religious context breaks ground in revealing how, in Renaissance Florence, an order could fashion, through independent altarpieces, a program that promoted its institutional values and stimulated modes of viewing that served its devotional and educational needs.

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- Fig. 171: Saint Augustine and Saint Monica before a Vision of the Trinity (Florentine). Private collection. Second half of the fourteenth century.

## Introduction

This dissertation examines four altarpieces commissioned from different artists between 1485 and ca.1500 for private chapels in Santo Spirito, the fifteenth-century church of the order of the Augustinian Hermits in Florence. The existing church of Santo Spirito (fig. 1) was built during the second half of the fifteenth century according to plans drawn up by Filippo Brunelleschi. It replaced a thirteenth-century edifice that remained in use during the lengthy period of the new church's construction. However, in 1471, a fire broke out in the old church, destroying virtually all its free-standing decor. As a result, the fifteenth-century church, completed in ca. 1482, was largely decorated with new works commissioned by the lay individuals, families and confraternities that had acquired chapels within it. By the end of the quattrocento, altarpieces had been executed for the majority of Santo Spirito's most prestigious and expensive chapels, located in the tribune area surrounding the high altar.

From among these altarpieces, I have selected and studied four works that are unusually visually rich, iconographically discursive, and rhetorically demanding --Sandro Botticelli's Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints John the Baptist and John the Evangelist (fig. 3), Piero di Cosimo's Visitation with Saints Nicholas of Bari and Anthony Abbot (fig. 4), Filippino Lippi's Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints Martin of Tours, Catherine of Alexandria, the Young John the Baptist and Donors (fig. 5) and Agnolo del Mazziere's Holy Trinity between Saints Mary Magdalene and Catherine of Alexandria (fig. 6). Three of those works are the highly-admired products of painters who have long occupied the mainstream of the quattrocento Florentine canon. The fourth

is a carefully composed and exquisitely decorative panel by an artist, Agnolo del Mazziere, whose body of work has received significant recent attention. In itself, the quality of these paintings raises the question as to why they have not provoked the sustained interest of scholars or led to comprehensive and convincing interpretations. Arguably, the scholarship on these works has suffered from the assumption that virtually their only consumers would be their lay patrons and their families. This constituency, it is sometimes assumed, privileged the pure manifestation of their patron saint's protective and intercessory presence at the expense of creative pictorial argument –*invenzione*-- and narrative --*istoria*.<sup>1</sup>

With the exception of Elena Capretti's surveys of works still in situ and a more limited study by Jill Burke, scholarship focused on the decoration of Santo Spirito as a comprehensive whole has been scarce.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, independent work on the four altarpieces that I explore in this dissertation has been largely decontextualized. Art historians have focused on the relationship between a given altarpiece and the artist's overall oeuvre or on the patron's interests in the commission with little regard for the

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1. Charles Hope, "Altarpieces and the Requirements of Patrons," in Christianity and the Renaissance: Image and Religious Imagination in the Quattrocento, ed. Timothy Verdon and John Henderson (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1990), 535-571. At issue, as well, is the reaction of art historians to the perceived excesses of the iconographic approach pioneered by Erwin Panofsky, in, for instance, "Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance (Oxford University Press, 1939). Thus, before discussing Filippino Lippi's Nerli altarpiece, Patricia Lee Rubin warns us: "Fifteenth-century artists did not depict doctrine or illustrate abstruse points of theology." Patricia Lee Rubin, Images and Identity in Fifteenth-Century Florence (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007),

2. Capretti, The Building Complex of Santo Spirito, trans. Christopher Evans (Florence: Lo Studiolo Cooperativa, 1991); Capretti, "La pinacoteca sacra," in La Chiesa e il Convento di Santo Spirito a Firenze, ed. Christina Acidini Luchinat with Elena Capretti (Florence: Casa di Risparmio di Firenze, 1996). Capretti's work derives support from the research of Grazia Agostini, "La chiesa di Santo Spirito a Firenze dalle origini a tutto il Quattrocento. Tesi di Laurea, Università degli Studi di Firenze, facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia, 1976-7." As noted by Anabel Thomas, "Consultation of this text proves difficult." Anabel Thomas, Art and Piety in the Female Religious Communities of Renaissance Italy: Iconography, Space, and the Religious Woman's Perspective (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 56 n. 22. Jill Burke, Changing Patrons: Social Identity and the Visual Arts in Renaissance Florence (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004).

institutional and religious matrix of the mendicant church for which it was executed.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, even Capretti and Burke, in their recent investigations of the church's décor, rely on a conceptual framework primarily governed by the relationship between patron and artist. Only where the subject matter of an altarpiece appears complex is it suggested that the painter benefitted from the advice of the Augustinian Hermits, who are then inserted into the determinative relationship as learned advisors.<sup>4</sup>

To a surprising extent, this approach reflects a residual and implicit acceptance of a Burckhardtian view of the work of art as the largely secular product of the Renaissance artist and his patron, imagined as "free personalities" within the relatively loose parameters of their social and intellectual milieu.<sup>5</sup> Without implying that the Santo Spirito friars were able to impose their choice of subject matter and treatment on the altarpieces painted for the church, I believe that a formula based on the model of a private commission for a private locale,<sup>6</sup> may not speak to the prevalence or the character of the

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3. E.g., Ronald Lightbown, Botticelli (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978), 180–85; Dennis Geronimus, Piero di Cosimo: Visions Beautiful and Strange (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 198–204; Patrizia Zambrano and Jonathan Katz Nelson, Filippino Lippi (Milan: Electa, 2004), 459–68. Richard A. Goldthwaite, "The Demand for Religious Art," in Wealth and the Demand for Art in Italy: 1300–1600 (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1993), 69–148. Andrew C. Blume, "Studies in the Religious Paintings of Sandro Botticelli" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1995), 87–89. On the other hand, Thomas has studied the institutional provenance of two Quattrocento altarpieces associated with Santo Spirito, in particular Botticini's Santa Monica with Augustinian Nuns (the Mantellate altarpiece). Thomas, "Neri di Bicci, Francesco Botticini and the Augustinians," Arte Christiana, 81 no. 754 (1993): 23–24; Thomas, Art and Piety, 53–71. On the Mantellate altarpiece, see also Blume, "The Chapel of Santa Monica in Santo Spirito and Francesco Botticini," Arte Christiana 53, no. 769 (1995): 289–292.

4. Capretti, "La pinacoteca sacra," 283; Capretti, "Antefatti della Controriforma in Santo Spirito: tipologia, icoconografia e sviluppo dell'altare, dalla Visitazione di Piero di Cosimo all'altar maggiore del Caccini," in Altare e immagini nello spazio ecclesiale, ed. Anna Forlani Tempesti (Florence: Angelo Poncicoroli, 1996), 42–69; Burke, Changing Patrons, 79.

5. Jacob Burckhardt, The Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy, trans. S. G. C. Middlemore (London: Phaidon Press, 1965), 81.

6. One *locus classicus* for such an advisory relationship is that of Michelangelo and Angelo Poliziano, humanist and tutor to Lorenzo de' Medici's children, who, according to the sculptor's biographers,

Hermits' authority.<sup>7</sup> My contention is that the friars' influence on the iconography of the church's altarpieces was systemic, energetic and purposeful, and that it reflected the spiritual ideals, institutional concerns, and devotional practices of the order as a whole and of the Santo Spirito chapter in particular. To foreground the religious context of an altarpiece commissioned by laymen for a religious institution is to highlight the extent to which that work is responsive to and representative of the institutional claims and devotional needs of that institution's members. William Hood, in his work on the essentially Dominican identity of Fra Angelico's art, Megan Holmes, in her study of Filippo Lippi as a Carmelite painter, and Meredith J. Gill, in her monograph on the artistic influence of the Augustinian Hermits themselves, have all suggested how a religious order's particular sensibility and commitment to certain forms of self-fashioning might inform the works of its artists.<sup>8</sup>

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suggested to the young Michelangelo the subject of his Battle of Centaurs and Lapiths. Margrit Lisner, "Form und Sinngehalt von Michelangelos Kentaurenschlacht mit Notizen zu Bertoldo di Giovanni," Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz, 24/3 (1980): 299-344, 300-1, 311. See also Anthony Colantuono, Titian, Colonna and the Renaissance Science of Procreation: Equicola's Seasons of Desire (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 13 and n. 26.

7. The Franciscans of San Francesco in Borgo San Sepolcro, who devised a detailed iconography for Sassetta's multi-figured polyptych for the high-altar of their church may have benefitted from a uniquely compliant donor. James R. Banker, "The Program for the Sassetta Altarpiece in the Church of S. Francesco in Borgo Sansepolcro," I Tatti Studies, 4 (1991): 11-58. However, their active and confident involvement in the composition of that iconography gives us a glimpse of what may have been the underlying attitude of many religious orders towards the design of their church's décor. The uncertain state of the scholarship on this issue is suggested by Jonathan Katz Nelson's recent broad statement: "Most scholars assume that religious orders ... played an important role in determining the iconography in private chapels ... Nevertheless, there is little evidence to indicate just how much influence church officials wielded in chapel decorations." Jonathan Katz Nelson, "Memorial Chapels in Churches: The Privatization and Transformation of Sacred Spaces," in Renaissance Florence: A Social History, eds. Roger J. Crum and John T. Paoletti (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 360.

8. William Hood, Fra Angelico at San Marco (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993); Megan Holmes, Fra Filippo Lippi: The Carmelite Painter (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999); Meredith J. Gill, Augustine in the Italian Renaissance: Art and Philosophy from Petrarch to Michelangelo (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005). See also Joanna Cannon, "Simone Martini, the Dominicans and the Early Sienese Polyptych," Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes 45 (1982): 69-93.



In the same vein, although on a smaller scale, I have attempted to bring together the four altarpieces I discuss in order to ground them within the Augustinian milieu for which they were commissioned. In so doing, I have delineated iconographic and expressive themes that point to common rhetorical purposes -- to support the institutional identity of the Augustinian Hermits and their Florentine house and to encourage in their viewers the experience of a shared Augustinian spirituality. While thematic unity is rare in fifteenth-century churches,<sup>9</sup> the ideal of formal unity, which dominated the decoration of Santo Spirito in the late quattrocento and early cinquecento, may have encouraged the friars to attempt to coordinate the iconography of their chapel decoration as well.

I selected these four altarpieces commissioned for Santo Spirito during the quattrocento because they present a particularly telling case for the proposition that the Augustinians exercised considerable influence on the church décor. All four works were located in the tribune area of the church, behind the tramezzo or rood screen, and surrounding the friars' choir and the high altar. While lay families who owned chapels in the tribune would be permitted access to these chapels, this area was traditionally reserved for and under the control of the clergy. It thus seems likely that the friars would have considerable authority over the chapel decoration in that location. Indeed, in the same area of the church, there is evidence of a parallel effort to create, out of five different historiated altarpieces, an abbreviated cycle of the life of the Virgin.<sup>10</sup>

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9. Peter Humfrey, "Co-ordinated altarpieces in Renaissance Venice: the progress of an ideal," in The Altarpiece in the Renaissance, eds. Peter Humphrey and Martin Kemp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 190-211, 191.

10. A similar understanding of the decoration of the choir area in mendicant churches was expressed by Bram Kempers, Painting, Power and Patronage: The Rise of the Professional Artist in Renaissance Italy, trans. Beverley Jackson (New York, London: Penguin Books, 1994), 58: "At the choir altar the monks wanted the theological tenets and history of their order, as expressed in bulky treatises and countless sermons in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries, to be rendered in pictorial form. The altarpieces were intended for the priests and *conversi* who were well versed in the complexities of doctrines

Among the altarpieces of the tribune, I chose paintings whose compositions, whether diffuse, as in the case of the Capponi Visitation and the Nerli altarpiece, or concentrated, as in the Bardi altarpiece and the Corbinelli Trinity, are exceptionally pictorially rich. This visual density reflects --in addition to the Eucharistic and intercessory themes conventionally inscribed within quattrocento altarpieces--the presence of multiple and distinct iconographic *invenzioni* at the service of a comprehensive *idea*. Many of these novel *invenzioni* were derived from the writings of Augustine, while the *idea* which they portray--respectively, wisdom, charity, the peace of Ecclesia and the vision of God--are values or issues of particular concern to Augustine.

Another reason for selecting these particular works was their evident intent to engage the beholder in extended and concentrated viewing. Thus, the Bardi altarpiece and the Capponi Visitation include legible and lengthy inscriptions that encourage careful reading and, as well, half-concealed features--the breasts of the Bardi Christ Child, the Visitation's extended desert terrain--that reward thorough study. A third panel, the Nerli altarpiece, prompts the viewer to assimilate into the act of beholding both the prayer inscribed on the predella and the narrative originally depicted in the chapel window. Finally, three of the paintings locate highly naturalistic elements in the foreground: an edging of empty space in the Bardi altarpiece, a pair of hyper-naturalistic saints in the Visitation, and a prominent skull and bones in the Corbinelli Trinity. These features both compel the viewer's attention and create, from the apparent continuity of real and painted space, an effect of heightened immediacy.

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such as the transubstantiation and incarnation. Advisers on artistic commissions were also drawn from this elite... The learned friars saw the altarpieces as a synopsis of their liturgical precepts, historical teachings and theological dogmas..." See also Henk Willem van Os, Marias Demut und Verherrlichung in der sienesischen Malerei 1300-1450 (The Hague: Kunsthistorische Studien van her Nederlands Historisch Instituut te Rome, I: 1969), 11-33.

Studied together as the varied expressions of and responses to a common sensibility and intentionality, these altarpieces raise issues at the confluence of several art-historical approaches which have been the subject of current discussion in the field.<sup>11</sup> I am aware of the reluctance of some art historians to reduce a work of art to a single iconographic interpretation, and of their sensitivity to the notion of the beholder's involvement in constructing a wide array of meanings. In the case of the four panels I discuss, the importance of novel narratives to the formulation of thematic arguments ensures the beholder's engagement in the reading of these narratives. John Shearman's question, "What is supposed to be happening, what is represented as going on?" was key to the fifteenth-century viewer as it is today to the art historian.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the altarpieces appear to have been conceived in the expectation that the viewer would come to the painting prepared to fashion subsidiary meanings by freely connecting figures, objects and settings with each other and to project himself--or herself--on the field of play presented by the setting. This may be particularly true of the visually rich panels painted by Filippino Lippi and Piero di Cosimo, full of detail and incident.<sup>13</sup> In some cases, in fact, the panels include indeterminate areas that I have described as "meditative fields" for the beholder's imaginative projections.<sup>14</sup> The particular receptivity of these paintings

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11. Stanley Fish's approach --albeit derived from the field of literary studies-- may be conceptually helpful here. Fish's notion of "interpretive communities..." who "... shared strategies for writing texts," --or, in our case, for painting images-- suggests how different artists working for different lay patrons but within the same institutional religious context could engage in a similar rhetorical strategy. Stanley Fish, "Interpreting the Variorium," Stanley E. Fish, Critical Inquiry, 2, no. 3 (1976): 465-485, 483.

12. John Shearman, Only Connect: Art and the Spectator in the Italian Renaissance (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 16.

13. We are very close here to the medieval mnemonic monastic meditation described by Mary Carruthers, The Craft of Thought: Meditation, Rhetoric and the Making of Images 400-1200 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

to freely associative viewing connects them to the monastic meditative practices described by Jean Leclercq,<sup>15</sup> and to the use of affective mental images during meditation as suggested, for instance, by the fifteenth-century Augustinian friar, Jordan of Quedlinburg in his Meditationes de Passione Christi.<sup>16</sup>

The first chapter of my study reviews the history and ideals of the order of the Augustinian Hermits and of Santo Spirito, in particular. It also lays out the architectural context of Brunelleschi's fifteenth-century building, and addresses in general terms the involvement of the Augustinian friars in the decoration of their church. The second chapter focuses on Botticelli's Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints John the Baptist and John the Evangelist, painted in 1485 for the chapel of Giovanni d'Agnolo de' Bardi and now in the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin (fig. 3, no. 21<sup>17</sup>). Chapter 3 concerns Piero di Cosimo's Visitation with Saints Nicholas of Bari and Anthony Abbot (ca. 1490-1498), commissioned for the funeral chapel of Neri di Gino Capponi and today in the National Gallery of Art in Washington DC (fig. 4, no. 14). Chapter 4 discusses the altarpiece by Filippino Lippi commissioned by Tanai de Nerli for his chapel, The

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14. My fields resemble the "screens" on which Gombrich's beholder completes his image. However, Gombrich's discussion takes place at the level of unconscious cognitive processes, while I am describing a form of imaginative visual play. E. H. Gombrich, "The Beholder's Share," in Art and Illusion (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960), 181ff.

15. Jean Leclercq, The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture, transl. Catharine Misrahi (New York: Fordham University Press, 1961), 74. This is repeated: see n. 14.

16. Eric L. Saak, High Way to Heaven: The Augustinian Platform Between Reform and Reformation, 1292–1524 (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 478. There is agreement that aspects of medieval monastic thought were transmitted to the mendicant orders of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and incorporated into their praxis. Timothy Verdon notes "the longevity of monastic influence beyond the Middle Ages, and its translation by the mendicant orders into forms accessible to the urbanized society of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy." "Monasticism and Christian Culture," in Monasticism and the Arts, ed. Timothy Gregory Verdon (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1984), 3.

17. Numbers placed in parenthesis following figure numbers refer to chapel locations according to the numbering followed in Figure 2: Santo Spirito Interior, location of chapels.

Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints Martin of Tours, Catherine of Alexandria, the Young John the Baptist and Donors (ca. 1494), still in situ at Santo Spirito in its original chapel within its original frame (fig. 5, no. 12). Finally, the fifth chapter deals with Agnolo del Mazziere's late fifteenth-century Holy Trinity between Saints Mary Magdalene and Catherine of Alexandria, commissioned as a result of an original bequest by Matteo Corbinelli. The work has also remained in its original chapel within the church and preserved its original frame and altar-frontal (fig. 5, no. 28).

## I: The Augustinian Hermits and the Church of Santo Spirito

### A. The Augustinian Hermits

Until the mid-thirteenth century, the Hermits of Saint Augustine<sup>18</sup> were one of many dispersed eremitical foundations that followed the Rule of Saint Augustine, a set of general prescriptions for communal living usually attributed to the saint.<sup>19</sup> In 1255, a papal decree gathered these groups into one mendicant order, the *Ordo Eremitarum Sancti Augustini*, on the model of the Dominicans and the Franciscans. Under the early guidance of a scholar of considerable renown, Giles of Rome, and allied intellectually and politically with the papacy, the order saw a steady geographic expansion. In 1327, Pope John XXII granted the Hermits a right to custody of the tomb of Saint Augustine at San Pietro in Pavia coequal to that of the Augustinian Canons who had been established at San Pietro more than a century before. The new order's ensuing conflict with the Canons, as well as its natural rivalry with other mendicant orders, appears to have energized the Augustinians Hermits into further efforts at institutional self-definition and growth. The thirteenth and fourteenth centuries saw the order's prestige rise thanks,

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18. Fundamental resources for this brief institutional and cultural overview include, among others, David Gutierrez, *The Augustinians in the Middle Ages, 1357–1517*, trans. Thomas Martin (Villanova, PA: Augustinian Historical Institute, Villanova University, 1983; orig. 1977); Saak, *High Way to Heaven*; and Gill, *Augustine in the Italian Renaissance*.

19. The text known as Saint Augustine's Rule has long been the subject of controversy as to the circumstances of its authorship. The most exhaustive study was conducted by Luc Verheijen, who concluded that the Rule was written by Augustine in 397 for his own "monastic" circle at Hippo. Verheijen, *La Règle de Saint Augustin*, I. Tradition manuscrite, II. Recherches historiques (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1967); Verheijen, *Nouvelle approche de la Règle de Saint Augustin* (Maine et Loire, France: Abbaye de Bellefontaine, 1980), 7. The orders that followed Augustine's Rule in the later Middle Ages included not only the Augustinian Hermits and the Regular Canons, but also the Dominicans and the Premonstratensians. Saak, *High Way to Heaven*, 9.

among other causes, to its widespread network of schools dedicated to the teaching of its members, to the rigorous academic training of its superiors, and to the prominence of its scholars and preachers. While the numbers of the Augustinian Hermits were few in comparison to the Franciscans and the Dominicans—a few widely dispersed over almost all of Europe—their reputation for scholarship and piety more than matched that of the other mendicant orders.

During the fifteenth century, the papal schism of 1378–1417 was reflected in a bitter division in leadership among the Augustinian Hermits. The traumatic effects of the schism contributed to the reform movement of the later fifteenth century. The reform's Observant communities were dedicated to a renewed communal life and a reaffirmed ideal of apostolic poverty.<sup>20</sup> Many of the order's prominent fifteenth-century intellectuals, such as Andrea Biglia, Evangelista da Pisa and Mariano da Genazzano, were attracted to the Observant movement.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, Observant impulses appear to be at work throughout the history of the entire order and, indeed, animate the perpetual struggle of the superiors to maintain communal living, the observance of the liturgy and the discipline of the cloister.<sup>22</sup>

Particularly relevant to this study is the specifically Augustinian character of the order's program of indoctrination, a program that served a broader agenda of order wide stability, adherence to communal ideals and spiritual fervor. Narratives, extrapolating freely from Augustine's Confessions and published in Augustinian convents during the

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20. Saak, High Way to Heaven, 592–95.

21. Katherine Walsh, "Papal Policy and Local Reform. B) Congregatio Ilicetana: The Augustinian Observant Movement in Tuscany and the Humanist Ideal." Römische Historische Mitteilungen, 22 (1980): 128, 134–135.

22. E.g., Saak, High Way to Heaven, 242–43, 333.

1300s, describe eremitical communities in Tuscany and North Africa founded by the saint and later endowed with his rule.<sup>23</sup> Such narratives allowed the *Eremitani* to conceive of themselves in historical, and even familial, terms, as the true sons and heirs of Saint Augustine—“Pater Noster”—a perpetually effective and powerful figure with whom they maintained a living bond. In other words, the Augustinian creation narratives operated as myths within the Hermit communities, simultaneously creating a history and erasing the “pastness” of that history so that it might be fashioned into a living reality. At the same time, as Gill has argued, the need of the Augustinian Hermits to formulate a creation myth that distinguished them from the Augustinian Canons fostered a tendency to privilege the reclusive contemplative spirituality of the solitary hermit. Such an ideal was in actuality difficult to integrate into the complex lives of mendicant friars in the thriving urban communities of the fifteenth century.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless it was an object of persistent preoccupation to the Hermits, affecting the mode of life of their fifteenth-century communities, both Observant and Conventual, and influencing the character of the art displayed in their churches.

Saak has noted that, since its inception as an institution in the late thirteenth century, the order relied on two pillars to ensure stability and continuity: the regular observance of the Augustinian Rule and the theological schools.<sup>25</sup> The observance consisted of the prescriptions for communal living set out both in the Rule and in subsequent *Constitutiones* published by the general chapters of the order. The Rule and

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23. Saak, *High Way to Heaven*, 187–234; Gill, *Augustine in the Italian Renaissance*, 31–34.

24. Gill, *Augustine in the Italian Renaissance*, 38–39.

25. Saak, *High Way to Heaven*, 234–345.



the Constitutions regulated all aspects of communal life, such as participation in meals, timing of the regular liturgies and the requirement of apostolic poverty, including the surrendering of individual possessions and the renunciation of luxury in imitation of the apostles. As a mode of life, the observance both promoted and symbolically manifested the ethical ideals fundamental to Christianity: humility, charity, chastity, obedience, prayer and poverty.<sup>26</sup> While the superiors of the order, in particular the priors general, appear, by and large, to have exercised their energies to enforce the observance and to bring infractions to light, the Augustinians' relatively small numbers and their dispersal across Europe may have led to relatively widespread infractions of the regular observance.<sup>27</sup>

The order's theological schools provided for the fundamental indoctrination of its members<sup>28</sup> and for the preparation of the order's pedagogical and administrative elite. Becoming a *lector*, eligible to teach the rank and file of the order, required usually a three-year course in grammar, logic and philosophy at an Augustinian convent recognized as a *studio provinciale*, followed by five years at a *studio generale*. To reach the position of *bachelor*, a friar would spend another five to seven years studying theology at a university. This would be followed by another four years at a university to reach the position of *magister*. In addition, as a mendicant order, the Augustinians were dedicated to the catechism of lay populations. The importance of the order's teachers and the high esteem in which its masters were held, as well as the order's commitment to the

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26. Ibid., 269.

27. Ibid., 333.

28. Once they were permitted to preach, friars who showed ability in that area were encouraged to do so frequently. Ibid., 186.

continuous education of its members and to teaching in a lay context, reflects Augustine's own commitment as a teacher. Teaching was understood as a comprehensive and integrated endeavor that fostered ethical as well as intellectual growth and thus reflected the social and affective character of the Augustinian praxis.

The rules of the observance and the theological schools buttressed a way of living that saw itself as the embodiment of a specifically Augustinian understanding of humanity—the breadth and depth of human interiority, the power of the affections over the human will and, in Bouwsma's words, “the integral unity of the personality.”<sup>29</sup> The Augustinian Rule, read every week, emphasized the communal aspects of a monastic life undertaken through individual spiritual and emotional commitment: the friars were required to live “one heart and mind in God” and admonished to observe the rule with delight (*dilectione*) as “lovers of spiritual beauty ...”<sup>30</sup> Emulating their father Augustine, they sought communal living, engagement in the religious life of the community and individual spiritual perfection. The ideal of the order envisaged contemplative yet active lives open to the social world and an equal emphasis on communal prayer and continuous inner meditative prayer.

The order's eremitical ideal in particular found an avenue of expression in a praxis of solitary prayer conducted outside the appointed times of communal prayer. The Augustinian Constitutions mention praying in the solitude of one's cell, praying “in the silence of the night, and heightening one's awareness of the presence of God ‘in every

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29. William J. Bouwsma, “The Two Faces of Humanism: Stoicism and Augustinianism in Renaissance Thought,” in Itinerarium Italicum: The Profile of the Italian Renaissance in the Mirror of Its European Transformations, eds. Heiko A. Oberman and Thomas Brady, Jr. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1975), 3–60.

30. Verheijen, Nouvelle Approche, 18, 27, 45–46.

good and worthy situation’.”<sup>31</sup> The rule required the friars, when they prayed with psalms and hymns “to meditate in your heart what you speak with your voice.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, Jerome of Siena, writing in the early fifteenth century, recommended “reading, prayer, meditation and contemplation.”<sup>33</sup> Similar testimonies to the practice of silent prayer and meditative practices have come to us from Andrea Biglia and Egidio da Viterbo, among others.<sup>34</sup> As Saak has suggested, the creation of mental images was a crucial component of the meditative process;<sup>35</sup> it was certainly one that was nourished by the presence of actual images. Thus, it seems very likely that the Augustinian Hermits’ pronounced emphasis on inward prayer and meditation would find its correlative in a visual environment that encouraged such practices.

According to the general chapter of 1287 in Florence, the order’s explicit source of doctrinal authority was the late thirteenth-century theologian and prior general of the order, Giles of Rome, who asserted an “affective theology,” directed towards the love of God.<sup>36</sup> Under the influence of this theology of the heart, theologians and teachers of the order both privileged the will over reason and subjected it to the power of the affections.<sup>37</sup> The knowledge that the Augustinians strove to reach was a *scientia spiritualis*

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31. Gutierrez, The Augustinians in the Middle Ages, 1357–1517, 105, citing Consitutiones Ordinis eremitarum sancti Augustini, Venice: 1508, ed. I. Arámburu (Valladolid: 1966), chs. 11 and 23.

32. “La Règle de Saint Augustin,” II 1, 3 in Verheijen, “Nouvelle Approche,” 20.

33. Jerome of Siena, “Il soccorso dei poveri,” in Delizie degi erudite toscani II (Florence: 1771), 99ff, cited in Gutierrez, 105.

34. Gutierrez, The Augustinians in the Middle Ages, 1357–1517, 105–6.

35. Saak, 484, 485.

36. Giles of Rome, In primum librum Sententiarum, prol. 4 (Venice, 1521; repr. Frankfurt, 1968), fol. 8th, cited in Saak, High Way to Heaven, 365.

37. Bouwsma, “Two Faces of Humanism,” 38; Gill, Augustine in the Italian Renaissance, 21.

bestowed through the grace of the Holy Spirit and prepared by an ethical praxis focused on humility, piety and charity. In keeping with this theological ideal, the Hermits' scholarly enterprise allied the theology of the universities with an affective spirituality that embraced at the same time study and worship, ethics and scholarship, life and knowledge.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, candidates for academic degrees, including that of *magister*, were ideally selected not only for their learning but for the ethical and spiritual tenor of their lives. These attitudes reflected not only the primacy of love in Augustinian thought, but also a vision of the order of Hermits as an earthly city that endeavored to reflect and conform to the heavenly City of God.<sup>39</sup>

The growth of the order, its intellectual accomplishments and prestige testify to a rich intellectual life rooted in the prodigious work of Saint Augustine as a writer. While Augustine served throughout the Middle Ages as a virtual embodiment of Church doctrine, his popularity and that of patristic literature generally rose considerably during the early Renaissance. The Augustinian friar Bartolomeo da Urbino's 1350 Milleloquium veritas S. Augustini, an immense and thoroughly researched concordance of Augustine's writings, was widely copied and distributed.<sup>40</sup> Among Augustine's own works, The Confessions became extremely popular in the fifteenth century, as is testified by the

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38. Saak, High Way to Heaven, 360.

39. Ibid., 367–68.

40. Charles L. Stinger, Humanism and the Church Fathers: Ambrogio Traversari (1386–1439) and Christian Antiquity in the Italian Renaissance (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1977), 96; Gill, Augustine in the Italian Renaissance, 10.

number of late fifteenth-century editions of the book in the vernacular, while his City of God was one of the first works to be printed.<sup>41</sup>

The influence of Saint Augustine and the Augustinians on the development of Renaissance humanism has been much discussed.<sup>42</sup> That influence, it should be noted, was circular: the Augustinian friars themselves were influenced by humanist values and modes of thought, many of which were expressed through the life and writings of their founding father. A late classical rhetorician by training, Augustine served as a model for the integration of classical learning and the Christian faith. As interpreted by Saint Augustine, classical literature, in particular Cicero, could be read as a handmaiden of persuasive rhetoric and moral philosophy.<sup>43</sup> As Charles Trinkaus has shown, most influential perhaps was Petrarch's encounter with the Augustine of The Confessions, a restless and acutely emotional and introspective inner self that mirrored his own, and, in response, a theology of grace that offered hope to the soul.<sup>44</sup> The works of Augustine were to retain their popularity in humanist circles throughout the fifteenth century. Ficino and Pico della Mirandola, for instance, relied on the Neoplatonic strains in

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41. Gill, Augustine in the Italian Renaissance, 2.

42. The seminal article is Paul Oscar Kristeller, "Augustine and the Early Renaissance," The Review of Religion 8, no. 4 (May, 1944): 339–58.

43. Ake Bergvall, Augustinian Perspectives in the Renaissance (Uppsala, Sweden: Uppsala University Press, 2001), 72.

44. Bouwsma, "Two Faces of Humanism," 34. Trinkaus argued that the moral, and intensely emotional tenor of Augustine's spiritual search was responsive to the need of a more secular and urban fourteenth-century world—of which Petrarch was an early and sensitive representative—for a lived and felt Christianity, one that was more experientially present than the objective theology of the scholastics. Charles Trinkaus, In Our Image and Likeness: Humanity and Divinity in Italian Humanist Thought, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970; repr., Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 3–50.

Augustine's work in their efforts to link Plato's pursuit of the One and the Christian search for God.<sup>45</sup>

Specifically, the humanists seized upon the classical rhetorical tradition as a tool for moral development because it conformed to a Christian and Augustinian understanding of the self as essentially affective. Since will and love functioned as the crucial motor of the soul, rhetoric, the discipline of choice of the humanists, outweighed academic disputation as agent of persuasion and guide of the emotions.<sup>46</sup> Petrarch, an admirer of the Augustinians, who was admired and followed by them in turn,<sup>47</sup> extolled within a Christian context these "teachers of the virtues ... whose first and last intention is to make the hearer and reader good ... by sowing in our hearts love of the best and eager desire for it ..."<sup>48</sup> By far the best-known preacher among the Augustinian Hermits in the 1480s was the humanist and Observant friar Mariano da Genazzano, one of the earliest preachers to abandon the argumentative scholastic model, often practiced by the Dominicans, and display his use of rhetorical ornament.<sup>49</sup>

The specific influences of the Augustinian Hermits on the early development of humanism have been widely discussed.<sup>50</sup> It was an Augustinian friar, Dionigi di Borgo

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45. Gill, Augustine in the Italian Renaissance, 23; Bergvall, Augustinian Perspectives, 78.

46. Praising Cicero, Seneca and Horace over Aristotle, Petrarch claimed: "He <Aristotle> teaches what virtue is, I do not deny that; but his lesson lacks the words that sting and set afire and urge toward love and virtue and hatred of vice, or at any rate, does not have enough of that power." Francesco Petrarch, "On His Own Ignorance and That of Many Others," trans. Hans Nachod, in The Renaissance Philosophy of Man, ed. Ernst Cassirer, Paul Oskar Kristeller, and John Herman Randall, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 103.

47. Gill, Augustine in the Italian Renaissance, 35.

48. Petrarch, "On His Own Ignorance," 104–5.

49. Ingrid D. Rowland, The Culture of the High Renaissance: Ancients and Moderns in Sixteenth Century Rome (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 144.

San Sepolcro, who encouraged Petrarch to read Saint Augustine and gave him the famous copy of The Confessions which the poet was to carry to the top of Mont Ventoux.

Eventually, that same volume of The Confessions was handed down to another Augustinian friar, Luigi Marsili of Santo Spirito in Florence. A Florentine Augustinian Hermit, Martin of Signa, was to play a similar role of friend and spiritual confidant for the poet Boccaccio, who eventually left his library to Santo Spirito. Among others, the Hermit Andrea Biglia (ca.1395–1435), who taught the *humanitas*—moral philosophy, rhetoric and poetics—at the University of Florence, was a distinguished translator of Aristotle and a historiographer.<sup>51</sup>

The theologians among the Augustinian Hermits were schooled in dialectic and logic; the fifteenth-century friar Evangelista da Pisa, for instance, taught logic at the University of Florence. They distinguished themselves, however, in their contribution to the renewal of textual exegesis, a patristic and specifically Augustinian mode of inquiry, as against the philosophical speculations of the scholastics. Beginning in the fourteenth century, the Hermits reemphasized a patristic theology focused on the close textual study of scripture and commentary.<sup>52</sup> Bartolomeo da Urbino's immense and popular Milleloquium veritatis S. Augustini was remarkable, in part, because of its author's close

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50. Paul Oscar Kristeller, "The Contribution of Religious Orders to Renaissance Thought and Learning," The American Benedictine Review 21, no. 2 (1979): 1–55; Rudolph Arbesmann, Die Augustinereremitenorden und der Beginn der humanistischen Bewegung (Würzburg: Augustinus-Verlag, 1965); Gutierrez, Augustinians in the Middle Ages 1357-1517, ch. 7, 159–73; Gill, Augustine in the Italian Renaissance, 13–17.

51. Rudolph Arbesmann, "Andrea Biglia, Augustinian Friar and Humanist (+1435)," Analecta Augustiniana, 28 (1965): 186–218.

52. Stinger, Humanism and the Church Fathers, 95; Gill, Augustine in the Italian Renaissance, 11.

and discriminating reading of the Augustinian corpus.<sup>53</sup> Particularly influential in this regard was the scholar Gregory of Rimini who, as prior general of the order (1300–1358), strove to reemphasize the basic tenets of Augustine’s thinking and openly upheld the authority of scripture and the practice of Augustinian exegesis against the scholastic program of philosophical speculation.<sup>54</sup>

The *Eremitani* contributed to the dissemination of Augustinian thought in humanist circles by fostering and participating in intellectual gatherings. The role of Luigi Marsili at Santo Spirito in attracting to his cell the Florentine humanists of the late trecento has been seen as an initiatory paradigm for the entire humanist endeavor, in which cultural gatherings evolved into more or less formal academies—social, experiential counterparts to the classicizing dialogue.<sup>55</sup> Marsili’s was clearly a seminal figure; he not only created a social atmosphere where discussion could flourish, but also embodied an ideal integration of immense erudition and deeply felt and lived Augustinian piety.<sup>56</sup>

## **B. The Augustinian Convent of Santo Spirito**

Within the order of the Augustinian Hermits, the Santo Spirito chapter, which belonged to the Tuscan or Pisan province, enjoyed prestige as one of the older and larger foundations and as a center of higher studies. During the first half of the thirteenth

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53. Gutierrez, Augustinians in the Middle Ages 1357-1517, 162; Stinger, Humanism and the Church Fathers, 96.

54. Stinger, Humanism and the Church Fathers, 96–97; Gill, Augustine in the Italian Renaissance, 11.

55. P. Gino Ciolini, “Santo Spirito: Città di Dio, città dell’ uomo,” in La Chiesa e il Convento, 24, citing E. Garin, L’Umanesimo italiano (Bari: Laterza, 1952), 141.

56. Arbesmann, Augustinereremitenorden, 74.



century, an Augustinian community had established a convent dedicated to Saint Matthew in the hills of the Arcetri, south of Florence. In 1250, with papal encouragement, some of their number settled in the sparsely populated Oltrarno in order to increase their apostolic activities in an environment that was growing rapidly more urban.<sup>57</sup> In 1252, the foundation in Florence began construction of a new church dedicated to Mary, all the saints, and the Holy Spirit. The 1256 papal bull *Licet Ecclesiae Catholicae*, which united the Augustinian Hermit groups into one unified mendicant order under papal protection, may have given an additional impetus to the new Florentine community. By 1261, the convent numbered fourteen priests as well as a number of lay brothers; by 1279 nineteen priests were in residence. The Hermits appear to have largely completed the construction of their convent, school, and church by 1280, and, in 1287, the general chapter of the order was held at Santo Spirito.<sup>58</sup>

As Francesco Quinterio notes, the date of the initial construction of the Augustinian church coincides with that of the completion of the Santa Trinita Bridge that first linked the Oltrarno to the center of the city.<sup>59</sup> The convent's expansion reflected and was a part of the economic surge and rapid demographic growth of the neighborhood and its expanding links to the rest of Florence.<sup>60</sup> The Augustinian foundation did not simply prosper, it grew into both the major religious community of the Oltrarno and an important

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57. Capretti, *Building Complex*, 9.

58. Arbesmann, "The 'Vita aurelii augstini hipponensis episcopi' in Cod. Laurent. Plut. 90 Sup. 48," *Traditio*, 18 (1962): 326.

59. Francesco Quinterio, "Il complesso di Santo Spirito dal primo insediamento Agostiniano al progetto del Brunelleschi," in *La Chiesa e il Convento*, 34.

60. Arbesmann, "Vita Aurelii Augustini," 326.

sociocultural center. The pastoral ministry exercised by the friars—notably, preaching, the hearing of confessions, the celebration of the Mass and the support of confraternities—appears to have cemented their relationship with the neighborhood population.<sup>61</sup> The square in front of the church served as a public space for the preaching by the friars and for Santo Spirito’s feast day celebrations, notably, the feasts of the Pentecost, the Virgin, Saint Matthew, Saint Augustine, and the recently canonized Augustinian saint, Nicholas of Tolentino.

In turn, the community of Santo Spirito relied on the neighborhood as well as the city for the composition of at least part of its membership.<sup>62</sup> The Augustinians depended as well on the patronage of religious confraternities, the penitential Compagnia del Crocefisso dei Bianchi, the Company of the Angelo Raffaele and, importantly, the Compagnia dello Spirito Santo delle Laude, detta del Piccione, all of whom dedicated altars in the church.<sup>63</sup> One of the better-known *sacre rappresentazioni*, the Pentecost play, took place annually at Santo Spirito under the auspices of the Laudesi.<sup>64</sup> The Hermits also relied on the support and the involvement of important neighborhood families whose wealth ensured the church’s decoration and whose prestige drew other patrons. Beginning early in the fourteenth century, members of the principal families in

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61. Gutierrez, *Augustinians in the Middle Ages 1357-1517*, 185–194. Luigi Marsili, for instance, known primarily as a scholar and a humanist, wrote a popular *Regola per ben confessarsi* (ibid., 189).

62. Walsh, “Papal Policy and Local Reform,” 113. Marsili came from a well-to-do Florentine family from the *quartiere* of Santo Spirito.

63. The company of the Laudesi was operating by 1322. Its tax declaration for 1327 includes “each year two suppers for the friars of Santo Spirito at 4 florins each.” The company appears to have included among its members a greater number of wealthy merchants than did other Oltrarno confraternities. Nerida Newbigin, *Feste d’oltrarno: Play in Churches in Fifteenth-Century Florence* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1996), 157.

64. The earliest reference to the Pentecost play dates from 1416. The last representation, in 1471, was the cause of the fire that destroyed the decoration of the old church. Newbigin, *Feste d’oltrarno*, 206.

that neighborhood—the Velluti, the Bonamichi and the Corsini—were buried in the monastery cloisters. In the thirteenth-century church, the Arrighi, for instance, dedicated two altars, one to Saint Catherine of Alexandria, the other to the Holy Ghost, while the Capponi purchased an altar in the name of their family saint, Saint Nicholas of Bari. The most important contributors to the early church appear to have been the Frescobaldi, who acquired burial rights in the area of the church's high altar.<sup>65</sup>

At the same time, in comparison with the neighborhood patronage connections of other convents in the area, such as Santa Maria del Carmine, the patron families of Santo Spirito were spread among the elite of the four administrative districts or *gonfaloni* into which the Oltrarno was subdivided in 1343.<sup>66</sup> By that date, the entire Oltrarno quarter had taken on the name of Santo Spirito and adopted its coat of arms, the white dove on an azure field.<sup>67</sup> Together with its convent, the church functioned to a greater or lesser extent as a symbol of the Oltrarno and its social and cultural distinctiveness within the urban world of Florence.<sup>68</sup> In addition, the foundation's relationship with the commune was exceptional among the religious orders in Florence, in that the city had not only funded but owned, controlled and maintained the church and the conventual buildings.

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65. The thirteenth-century church included, in addition, the following dedicated altars: Saint Nicolas of Tolentino given by the Arrighi (with an altarpiece), Saint Peter de' Rossi by the confraternity of the Bianchi, Saint Anthony by the Biliotti, Saint Matthew by the Biliotti, Saint Lucy by the Baroni, the Adoration of the Magi by the Ridolfi and Saint Michael by the Dalla Lisca. Quinterio, "Il complesso di Santo Spirito," 42.

66. Burke, *Changing Patrons*, 65.

67. Capretti, *Building Complex*, 5.

68. Quinterio ("Il complesso di Santo Spirito," 43) describes the church as having, within the Oltrarno, a quasi-civic function close to that of a cathedral.

The sole reason for this, ascertainable from the convent's records, is that the magnificence of the building made its upkeep too expensive for the Florentine Hermits.<sup>69</sup>

While embedded in its Oltrarno neighborhood and connected to the larger city of Florence, Santo Spirito was institutionally rooted in the larger order of the Augustinian Hermits, as one of its older and larger chapters, and, as a result, spiritually and imaginatively connected with the figure of Augustine himself. The convent's dedication to Santo Spirito, along with Mary and Saint Matthew, was not a common one among Augustinian foundations, which appear to have employed a variety of namesakes.<sup>70</sup> However, it is certainly appropriate for a foundation that sought to disseminate and give life to the thinking of Augustine. In particular, the saint's views on the role of the Holy Spirit as the mediator of divine grace were central to his understanding of the relations between man and God. That the convent's name was meaningful to the community within its walls is clear from the thirteenth-century church's hosting of the Pentecost play and its dedication, in the original church, of at least one altar to the Holy Spirit, located in a chapel decorated with a Descent of the Holy Spirit by Maso di Banco. Under the influence of Augustine, the Santo Spirito foundation clearly envisioned itself as a successor to the apostles, who had been endowed by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost with the

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69. "Perche fu una magnificentissima fabbrica che a mantenerla sarebbe stato di spesa grandissima a ditto Monastero, la Repubblica si riser oil dominio et alla Religione concesse l'uso." ASF, Corporazioni Religiose Soppress MS 122 (Scritture diverse del Convento di Santo Spirito, 1549–1692) vol. 90, F. 442, cited in Newbiggin, *Feste d'oltrarno*, 160. The willingness of the commune through the centuries to fund the building projects of the Santo Spirito friars has been read as an effort on its part to maintain some control over the sociopolitical life of the Oltrarno. Burke, *Changing Patrons*, 64. In more concrete terms, the city may have been interested in maintaining an institution that seems to have functioned, to some extent, as a prestigious annex to the city's university and that provided social support—and thus helped maintain social order—in the Oltrarno's poorer districts.

70. Quinterio, "Il complesso di Santo Spirito," 34 n. 15.

ability to preach and to teach.<sup>71</sup> Augustine's many writings on the gifts of the Holy Spirit must have been relevant as well to the monastic community: "The spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him: the spirit of wisdom, and of understanding, the spirit of counsel, and of fortitude, the spirit of knowledge, and of godliness. And he shall be filled with the spirit of the fear of the Lord" (Is. 11:2–3). In several works, Augustine discussed the gifts of the Holy Spirit as experiences undergone by the fervent believer in reverse order. In other words, God's Grace will lead him or her from an initial state of fear of the Lord to the ultimate attainment of wisdom, clearly a path that the friars, who embraced Augustine as teacher and father, would aspire to follow.<sup>72</sup>

The Santo Spirito chapter was usually the residence of the provincial superior of the Pisan province of the Hermits.<sup>73</sup> Moreover, in 1287, the convent was appointed one of the order's four Italian *studia generalia*, the *studium generalia in Curia Romana*. While the schools of grammar and the *studia provincialia* primarily prepared students for the duties of the priesthood, the *studia generalia* provided the scholars of the order with the philosophical and theological background that would allow them to pursue academic degrees, such as that of lector or master, at a university. After 1359, the University of Florence itself began to offer a doctorate in theology. The first graduate to receive the doctorate from the university was an Augustinian friar, Francesco di Biancozzo de' Nerli, who was led back to Santo Spirito in an enthusiastic procession accompanied by the prior, public officials, and leading

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71. Augustine's Sermons 355 and 356 emphasize the "imitation" of the original apostolic community. Verheijen, *Nouvelle approche*, 204–205. Augustine's Rule refers as well to the Acts of the Apostles in its requirement of common ownership of all goods (I, 3).

72. Canisius van Lierde, "The Teaching of St. Augustine on the Gifts of the Holy Spirit from the Text of Isaiah 11:2–3," trans. Joseph C. Schnaubelt and Frederick van Fleteren, in *Augustine: Mystic and Mystagogue*, ed. Frederick Van Fleteren, Joseph C. Schnaubelt, and Joseph Reino, 5–110.

73. Arbesmann, "The *Vita Aurelii Augustini*," 329.

men of the city.<sup>74</sup> A number of Augustinian friars taught there, among them Augustinus Favaroni (later prior general), Evangelista da Pisa, Jerome of Naples and the humanist Biagia, all in the first part of the fifteenth century.

In the fourteenth century, Santo Spirito's *studium generale* appears to have ranked fourth in prestige among the approximately twenty four Augustinian *studie generale*, after these at Paris, Bologna and Padua and equal to the *studie* at Oxford and Cambridge.<sup>75</sup> The role of Santo Spirito as a *studium generale* of the order and its ties to the university go a long way in explaining its comparatively large size. Between the years 1410 and 1518, the major convents in the Pisan province boasted no more than fifteen members. During the same period, the Florentine house numbered from fifty to sixty members without counting religious from other provinces temporarily in residence.<sup>76</sup> Given the size and significance of the Florentine convent, it is not surprising that Santo Spirito was a frequent host of the order's general chapters, notably in 1284, 1287, 1324 and 1326.

The prominence of Santo Spirito within its neighborhood, its city and its order, strongly suggested by contemporary representations of the Oltrarno neighborhood (fig. 24), was given tangible expression in the religious images that decorated the church and the conventual buildings. One of these was the widely venerated early fourteenth-century crucifix belonging to the Compagnia del Crocefisso dei Bianchi. Others—almost all lost to us—were commissioned from some of the most important fourteenth-century artists in

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74. Matteo Villani, *Chronicles* (book 9, chap. 58), discussed in Gutierrez, *Augustinians in the Middle Ages 1357-1517*, 126. According to the research of Jonathan Davies, however, the course offerings in theology were meager and the university relied heavily on the friaries. Jonathan Davies, *Florence and Its University during the Early Renaissance* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 28.

75. Gutierrez, *Augustinians in the Middle Ages: 1256-1356*, trans. Arthur J. Ennis (Villanova, PA: Augustinian Historical Institute, Villanova University, 1983; orig. 1980), 142, 143.

76. Gutierrez, *Augustinians in the Middle Ages 1357-1517*, 97.

Florence. Maso di Banco, for instance, decorated the two altars patronized by the Arrighi family. One held a Madonna and Child with Saints Mary Magdalene, Andrew, Julian and Catherine of Alexandria, which survived the fire that struck the old church and remains in situ in the new. The other was decorated with a Descent of the Holy Ghost “condotte con grandissima arte,” according to Lorenzo Ghiberti.<sup>77</sup> In the cloister, Stefano Fiorentino painted three episodes from the life of Christ, The Transfiguration, The Navicella and The Healing of the Possessed, while Taddeo Gaddi frescoed two lunettes representing events from the Passion of Christ to either side of the chapter house entrance and a Crucifixion with Saints above the entrance to the refectory. The refectory itself was embellished by a grand fresco of The Crucifixion executed by Andrea Orcagna and still visible today.

In both the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the friars of Santo Spirito, like Augustinian Hermits elsewhere, were preoccupied with the image and, more profoundly, the identity of their order and its relationship, historical and spiritual, with its putative founder, Augustine. The Vita Aurelii Augustini Hipponensis Episcopi, one of the earliest extant *vitae* of the saint to emphasize his vocation as a hermit and his transmission of the rule to the Hermits, was composed by the prior of Santo Spirito between 1322 and 1331.<sup>78</sup> The *vita* describes how, following his conversion, Augustine joined certain followers of the first hermit saints Anthony and Paul, who had sought solitude in the hills of

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77. Lorenzo Ghiberti, I commentary, ed. Ottavio Morisani (Naples: Raccardo Ricciardi, 1947), 39, cited in Quinterio, “Il complesso di Santo Spirito,” 42.

78. MS. Pluto 90, sup. 48, Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, Florence. Arbesmann, “The Vita Aurelii Augustini”; Saak, 189–90.

Tuscany, and that he, eventually, gave them his rule.<sup>79</sup> The text thus contributes importantly to the order's mythical history and to its spiritual and political identity, and, in particular, affirms the significance of the Tuscan province to that identity.<sup>80</sup> Indeed, as Arbesmann points out, actual hermitages that followed the Augustinian Rule, among them the progenitor of Santo Spirito in the Arcetri outside Florence, prospered in the Tuscan hills, forming the core of the order finally established in 1256.<sup>81</sup> The friars' preoccupation with their connection to Saint Augustine and their conviction that the eremitical vocation was in some sense fundamental to their identity and their spirituality are currents of feeling that persist throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In 1470, the Vita Aurelii Augustini was bound together with a series of shorter *vitae* of Augustinian Hermit saints. The purpose of the compilation, according to the compiler, was to arouse the younger friars to the imitation of their holy works.<sup>82</sup>

As mendicant friars whose obligation was to reach out to the lay urban population that surrounded them, and as members of an institution that was both Augustinian and Florentine, the friars also saw themselves as spiritual intermediaries between their powerful patron, Saint Augustine, and the people and government of Florence. The fourteenth-century Vita Aurelii Augustini includes appendices that describe the saint's miraculous interventions at Santo Spirito. One miracle involves a crippled girl who, one evening in May, was cured after praying before an image of Saint Augustine displayed at

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79. Arbesmann. "Vita Aurelii Augustini," 341.

80. Ibid., 233; Saak, High Way to Heaven, 189–208.

81. Arbesmann notes: "In the tradition of the Augustinian Order the Tuscan Hermits always held a preeminent place. To the Great Union of 1256, which established the Order in its modern form, they had contributed the best developed organization....," "Vita Aurelii Augustini," 344 n. 68.

82. "Ut iuvenes frater, qui eos in corpore non viderunt, ista licet pauca da eis audientes, ad imitationem sanctorum operum incitentur." Arbesmann, "Vita Aurelii Augustini," 323 n. 20.



Santo Spirito.<sup>83</sup> The friars offered the saint their prayers of thanks, then headed across the Arno to the Palazzo del Podestà to inform the commune of the event. The podestà, Gentile Orsini, had just concluded saying the evening office with his household. Indeed, he had just celebrated the feast of Saint Augustine, even though it was not August 28, the saint's feast day, because the calendar in the Roman Breviary had—miraculously—instructed him to do so. Thus, in a gesture that denotes both allegiance and the intent to communicate the power of their patron saint, the friars cross the Arno to deliver the news of the miracle to the representative of the commune. That same saint is then described as compelling the podestà to celebrate his office. The case is made here that the very real dependence of the convent on the goodwill of the commune is balanced by the sacred power wielded by the friars. It is worth noting as well, that, in this case, while Augustine effected the miracle through an image, that image apparently did not become invested with sacred power. Instead, it simply transmitted the power of the saint and, thus, reflected power onto the spiritual community that prayed within the church's walls.

Miracles notwithstanding, Santo Spirito's prestige in Florence, but also probably within its own order, was very much tied to its reputation as a center of higher learning. The size and quality of its library was well-known and contributed significantly to the convent's prestige. In the mid-1400s, the library contained 577 manuscripts and was still growing.<sup>84</sup> An enthusiastic description given in the mid-fifteenth century by the Florentine Marco di Bartolomeo de Rustici conveys the character of the convent's academic prestige:

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83. Arbesman, "Vita Aurelii Augustini," 329.

84. Ciolini, "Santo Spirito," 28.

Santo Spirito, that fine and rich university, that in the world has no compare and [is] filled with volumes of every faculty. All the friars of said order come to study in Florence. It resembles a great castle provided with skilled teachers and brothers of theology, of which there are always a great number in that place. And by fortune and in and the present there have been the flower of theology in this church.<sup>85</sup>

A significant facet of the convent's intellectual character was its relationship with Florentine humanism. In the figure of one of its luminaries, Luigi Marsili, the convent exercised a very real influence on the development of the early humanist movement. Listing the early writers of Florence, Vespasiano da Bisticci mentions Marsili, along with Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio and the humanist Coluccio Salutati, and describes him as "also a theologian and very learned also in astrology, geometry and arithmetic."<sup>86</sup> Letters, written while Marsili completed the lengthy course of study required of masters of theology, signal his profound adherence to the Augustinian religious ideals. He allied his religious commitment and theological expertise with a remarkable knowledge of the classics, a specific interest in history, and impressive abilities as a rhetorician.<sup>87</sup> During the 1380s and early 1390s, Marsili presided from his cell over wide-ranging colloquies that featured such distinguished humanists as Niccolo Niccoli and Coluccio Salutati. According to the humanist Poggio Bracciolini, Marsili's cell was "always full of distinguished young men who took his life and manners as their model and visited by the best people drawn from every part as to some divine oracle."<sup>88</sup> Marsili was admired in

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85. Marco di Bartolomeo de Rusticci, Libro intitolato dell'andata al viaggio al S. Sepolcro e al monte Sinai, Biblioteca del Seminario Maggiore di Firenze, 100, 120, cited in Capretti, Building Complex, 9; Ciolini, "Santo Spirito," 30.

86. Vespasiano da Bisticci, The Vespasiano Memoirs: Lives of Illustrious Men of the XVth Century, trans. William George and Emily Waters (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 14.

87. Arbesmann, Der Augustinereremitenorden, 74–89.

Florence beyond strictly humanist circles. Upon Marsili's death in 1394, the commune paid for his elaborate funeral and for the erection of a funerary monument in the Duomo.<sup>89</sup>

Santo Spirito's reputation as a cultural center persisted after Marsili's death, very likely under the leadership of Grazia Castellani, a master of theology and mathematician who succeeded Marsili as provincial prior.<sup>90</sup> Indeed, according to Alessandro Wesselofsky, it is only in the early fifteenth century that philosophical and theological debates began to be held in systematic fashion at Santo Spirito. He describes the convent as "the first among the literary academies of the Quattrocento" and suggests that in the fifteenth century the discussions had become "more serious, the Latin more classical and the debates ever more tediously pedantic."<sup>91</sup> We do know that during the fifteenth century, the friar Evangelista da Pisa taught the humanists Lorenzo Pisano (ca.1391–1465) and Giannozzo Manetti (1396–1459) at Santo Spirito:

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88. Poggio Bracciolini, *Opera Omnia*, 271, cited in George Holmes, *The Florentine Enlightenment 1400–1450* (Oxford University Press, 1969), 8; Ciolini, "Santo Spirito," 17–31, 21–23; Gill, *Augustine in the Italian Renaissance*, 13–14.

89. On the other hand, Marsili's involvement, within the confines of Santo Spirito, a diverse group, which included laymen, strained his relations with his prior and many of the friars, so much so that in 1388, the Signoria called upon the prior general, Bartolomeo da Venezia, to remedy the situation. Bartolomeo sent Nicola da Cascia, future prior general, to resolve the conflict, apparently successfully. Arbesmann, *Der Augustinereremitenorden*, 110.

90. Ciolini, "Santo Spirito," 28.

91. "La prima tra le accademie letterarie del Quattrocento, se essa può così chiamarsi, apriva ... le sue sedute nel convento di S. Spirito de' Frati Agostiniani. È probabile che originasse dalle conversazioni di Luigi Marsili, dalle quali Coluccio Salutati si dice aver ricavato tanto profitto; certo che erano a lui posteriori ... Il fare letterario era divenuto più serio, il latino più classico, e le dispute, di una pedanteria sempre più noiosa." Alessandro Wesselofsky, introduction to *Il Paradiso degli Alberti: Ritrovi e Ragionamenti del 1389 Romanzo di Giovanni da Prato*, by Giovanni Gherardi da Prato, ed. Alessandro Wesselofsky, vol. 1 (1867; repr., Boston: Elibron Classics, 2006). Wesselofsky was the first editor of Giovanni Gherardi da Prato's ca. 1425 account of fictional—or, at least, fictionalized—erudite discussions, set in 1389, within a Florentine circle that included Marsili. Arnaldo della Torre, *Storia dell'Accademia Platonica di Firenze* (Florence: G. Carnesecchi, 1902), 200; Ciolini, "Santo Spirito," 28 n. 58; Gill, *Augustine in the Italian Renaissance*, 14.

Every day there (at the convent of Santo Spirito) they engaged in erudite disputation; every day they hung on a wall or on a column the subject of the dispute. The number of participants was numerous, among them Giannozzo (Manetti) distinguished himself by the fact that no one could resist the arguments he put forth.<sup>92</sup>

Pisano's Platonizing dialogue, De Amore, set in the late 1430s or early 1440s and written probably in the late 1450s, takes place at Santo Spirito and includes Evangelista da Pisa. Asked to speak of divine love, the friar explains that it almost surpasses human understanding.<sup>93</sup>

During the fifteenth century, courses taught at the Santo Spirito *studium*, particularly in theology, apparently supplemented these offered by the university.<sup>94</sup> The *studium* appears to have accepted lay students in at least some of its classes and offered courses beyond the field of theology, in philosophy, jurisprudence and even medicine.<sup>95</sup> Thus, we know that in 1500 the humanist Pietro Crinito (1465–1504) taught at Santo Spirito a course on Cicero's De Oratore.<sup>96</sup> Recent scholarship has shown that what was once believed to be a formal fifteenth-century Florentine "Platonic academy" was in fact

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92. "Faceansi ivi (nel convento di S. Spirito) ogni giorno dispute erudite; ogni giorno appendevansi alla parete o a una colonna l'argomento, di cui si dovea in quel di disputare. Era continuo e numeroso il concorso de' disputanti, fra' quali Giannozzo (Manetti) si distingueva per modo, che niuno poteva resistere agli argomenti da lui prodotti." Naldo Naldi, Vita di Giannozzo di Bernardo Manetti, cited in Wesselofsky, 75 n. 10. In his life of Giannozzo Manetti, Vespasiano da Bisticci notes that, as a young man, Manetti "used to go to S. Spirito, to which he had opened a way from his garden, and at S. Spirito at this time there were divers learned men, Messer Vangelista of Pisa and Messer Girolamo of Naples. The first taught logic and philosophy, and Giannozzo attended all his lectures." Vespasiano da Bisticci, Vespasiano Memoirs, 373.

93. Arthur Field, The Origins of the Platonic Academy of Florence (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 168 nn. 147, 148.

94. Jonathan Davies, Florence and Its University during the Early Renaissance (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 28.

95. Salvatore de Renzi, Storia della Medicina in Italia, vol. 2 (Naples, 1845), 219. Edgar Wind, The Religious Symbolism of Michelangelo: The Sistine Ceiling, ed. Elizabeth Sears (Oxford University Press, 2000), 166 and n. 116.

96. Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 756, fol. 185r, cited in Wind, Religious Symbolism, 166 n. 116.

a relatively loose intellectual current arising from fluid intellectual encounters.<sup>97</sup> In this context, as Gill has suggested, it may be helpful to think of Santo Spirito as one among several Florentine centers through which the quattrocento current of theological and philosophical inquiry flowed and from which it gathered momentum.<sup>98</sup>

Our specific understanding of Florentine Augustinian culture in the late fifteenth century is very much dominated by the figure of Mariano da Genazzano, a friar associated through the 1480s with the observant community of Lecceto near Siena. Passionate, but also highly literate, able to modulate his sermons with variations in tone and genre, witticisms and poetic ornament, Mariano was an extraordinarily popular preacher, an *angelo di Dio su terra* much admired by Poliziano and Lorenzo de' Medici, and in high demand as a preacher by such figures as Ludovico il Moro of Milan and Eleanora of Aragon, duchess of Ferrara.<sup>99</sup> In 1488, Lorenzo de' Medici had built for him the exquisitely appointed convent of San Gallo outside Florence. The inscription above the library door—*Sapientia aedificavit sibi locum*—gives us an indication of Mariano's poetic style. The classicizing eloquence of Mariano's rhetoric and the fluency of his presentation contrasted sharply with the more abrupt and fiery delivery of Girolamo

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97. James Hankins, "The Myth of the Platonic Academy of Florence," *Renaissance Quarterly* 44, no. 3 (Autumn 1991): 429–75.

98. Gill, *Augustine in the Italian Renaissance*, 14.

99. David Perini, *Un Emulo di Fra Girolamo Savonarola: Fra Mariano da Genazzano* (Rome: Tipografia dell'Unione Editrice, 1917); Gutierrez, "Tesi e note su Mariano da Genazzano," *Analecta Augustiniana*, 32 (1969), 117–204; AuloGreco, "La docta pietas degli umanisti e un documento della Biblioteca Angelica," *Accademie e biblioteche d'Italia* 30, no. 3 (1979): 210–238; Marc Deramaix, "Consumatum est: Rhetori et prophétie dans un sermon de Mariano Da Genazzano contre Savonarole," in *Savonarole: Enjeux, débats, questions, Actes du Colloque International* (Paris: 25–26–27 Janvier 1996), eds. A. Fontes, J.-L. Fournel, and M. Plaisance, 173–97 (Paris: Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, 1997; Wind, *The Religious Symbolism*, 154–158; Gill, *Augustine in the Italian Renaissance*,

Savonarola, prior of the Dominican convent of San Marco.<sup>100</sup> Mariano, moreover, was a critic of Savonarola's claims to prophetic vision and certainly of his resistance to Papal briefs to cease preaching.<sup>101</sup> In the early 1490s, however, Savonarola's popularity and power was on the ascendancy in Florence; by 1494, following the expulsion of the Medici and the subsequent expansion of Savonarola's influence, Mariano left Florence for Rome.<sup>102</sup> By 1495, he had become vicar-general of the Augustinian order, and by 1497, he was named prior general.

It seems very likely, as Mariano's biographer, Perini, surmises, that he preached at Santo Spirito.<sup>103</sup> More generally, however, it is not clear how close were the ties were between the Observant Mariano and the Conventual Augustinians of Santo Spirito. Whether or not Fra Mariano had close ties with Santo Spirito, his famous rhetorical style and the spirit it expressed could only have left a strong impression on members of his order in the Florentine convent. Aulo Greco has described that style as a conjunction of the *studia humanitatis* and the *studia divinitatis*. It seems that Mariano's eloquence was well grounded in the three Ciceronian purposes of *delectare*, *docere* and *movere* and that he was particularly adept at mingling styles and in the use of poetic figures. Mariano's use of poetry, of the air of mystery that haunts all metaphor, to draw his listeners to spiritual truth is suggested by Niccolo Valori's description of his conversations with the

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100. Donald Weinstein, Savonarola and Florence: Prophecy and Patriotism in the Renaissance (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970), 99, 100. Wind, The Religious Symbolism, 154-155.

101. A documented sermon given by fra Mariano before Pope Alexander VI on April 13, 1498 – thus after Savonarola's arrest and before his interrogation-- addresses the nature of prophecy and introduces references to the necessary struggle of the church against heretics and the active power of the papacy. Demaraix, "Consumatum est," 181-183.

102. Mariano was legally banned from Florence in 1497 for his alleged participation in a conspiracy against the regime. Deramaix, "Consumatum est," 174 n. 2.

103. Perini, Un Emulo di Fra Girolamo Savonarola, 22. We do know that, when in Florence, the friar had preached at the Duomo, San Lorenzo and his newly built convent of San Gallo.

friar and Pico della Mirandola at San Gallo. They gathered, he wrote, “quasi come una Academia della Cristiana religion disputando al continuo de’divino misteri et de’secreti sensi della teologia.”<sup>104</sup> Ultimately, however, Mariano’s discourse appears to have impressed his most discriminating contemporaries by its translation of distinctly parsed religious thought into verbal expression that was both precise and richly allusive, as suggested by the Augustinian Raffaele Brandolini in his 1499 eulogy for the preacher.<sup>105</sup> To the friars of Santo Spirito, living in an intellectual tradition influenced by Petrarch and molded by Luigi Marsili and his followers, Mariano’s own *docta pietas* must have seemed both familiar and deeply encouraging.<sup>106</sup>

If the figure of Mariano da Genazzano personifies the skills and sensibility that dominate the rhetoric, both verbal and pictorial, at Santo Spirito, two other personalities appear to have left their imprint on the affairs of the convent and its relationship with decorative works. Through roughly the first half of the fifteenth century, Fra Francesco Mellini (il Zoppo) was clearly an energetic and influential figure. Mellini received his degree as a master of theology from the University of Florence in 1437, although he was already preaching in 1428. He was appointed provincial of the Pisan province in 1454 and named regent of the Santo Spirito *studium* in 1455.<sup>107</sup> Importantly for our purposes, Mellini clearly administered and supervised the decoration of the female communities

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104. Niccolò Valori, Vita del Magnifico Lorenzo vecchio de’ Medici (Florence: Giunti, 1568), 15, cited in Deramaix, 176.

105. Greco, “La docta pietas degli umanisti,” 227.

106. Although the extent of the ties between fra Mariano and Santo Spirito are unclear, we know that his disciple, the young Augustinian friar, newly minted master of theology and enthusiastic Platonist Egidio da Viterbo (1469-1532), taught at Santo Spirito during the winter of 1494-1495 and resided there again in 1497.

107. Eulogio Nebreda del Cura, Bibliographia Augustiniana (Dubuque, Iowa: W.C. Brown, 1963), 204.

under the aegis of Santo Spirito. He is referred to frequently in this role by the painter Neri di Bicci in his Recordanze.<sup>108</sup> A comparable personality emerges in the second half of the fifteenth century in the figure of Fra Niccolò di Giovanni di Lapo Bichiellini, who in 1493 was prior of Santo Spirito and teaching theology in its *studium*. He was named procurator in 1485 and prior again from 1486 to 1487, from 1491 to the fall of 1496 and from 1497 till 1518, the date of his death.<sup>109</sup> The same Maestro Niccolò da Firenze, on February 19, 1494, certified the accounts for the decoration of the high altar of Sant'Elizabetta delle Convertite, an Augustinian convent of reformed prostitutes under the direction of the Santo Spirito friars.<sup>110</sup>

Maestro Niccolò was identified by Karl Frey as, very probably, the prior who treated Michelangelo with kindness before the sculptor's departure for Bologna in 1494. According to Vasari's account, "For the church of S. Spirito ... Michelangelo made a Crucifix of wood, which was placed, as it still is, above the lunette of the high-altar; doing this to please the Prior, who placed rooms at his disposal, in which he was constantly flaying dead bodies, in order to study the secrets of anatomy ..."<sup>111</sup> Condivi, in his report, adds that "he had much familiar intercourse with the Prior, and received many

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108. Neri di Bicci names him as "Maestro Franco D'Atonio zopo frate di Santo iSpro di Firenze ... Sindacho e prochuratore di dette monache e munistero." Neri di Bicci, Le Ricordanze (10 Mar. 1453–24 Apr. 1475), ed. and annotated Bruno Santi (Pisa: Edizione Marlin, 1976), 299, 151–52.

109. Karl Frey, Michelagnolo Buonarroti: Quellen und Forschungen zu seiner Geschichte und Kunst, vol. 1 (Berlin: Karl Curtius, 1907), 107–8. On July 16, 1493, Bichiellini's signature read: "Frater Nicholaus de Florentia sacrae paginae professor ac prior conventus sancti spiritus de Florentia ordinis heremitarum sancti Augustini licet immeritus."

110. Lightbown, Botticelli, 205.

111. Giorgio Vasari, Le vite de' piu eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori nelle redazioni del 1550 e 1558, ed. Rosanna Bettarini and Paola Barocchi, (Florence, 1966-87), 6:13, Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects, trans. Gaston du C. de Vere (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996), 2:649.



kindnesses from him ...”<sup>112</sup> The account certainly suggests that, in dealing with Michelangelo, Bichiellini showed himself to be respectful of the sculptor’s art, responsive to his needs and a capable conversationalist, qualities that would have been helpful to anyone who sought to advise artists on their commissioned works.

Santo Spirito was clearly an institution with multiple identities, a mendicant foundation ministering to the Oltrarno and tied to the city Florence, a thriving seat of higher learning that welcomed members of the order from all of Europe, and, as well, a convent of Augustinian friars, who followed a cloistered<sup>113</sup> and communal mode of life that enshrined their underlying loyalty to an eremitical ideal.<sup>114</sup> The complexities of Santo Spirito’s institutional status are apparent from its involvement in the theological and political conflicts that affected Florence during the late 1490s. The Florentine Hermits, like the Dominicans of Santa Maria Novella and the Franciscans at Santa Croce, counted among the opponents of Girolamo Savonarola.<sup>115</sup> Beginning in 1495, Pope Alexander VI made repeated attempts to restrict Savonarola’s preaching. As the conflict between the Dominican preacher and the papacy intensified, the enmity between the

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112. Asciano Condivi, *Vita di Michelagnolo Buonarroti, raccolta per Asciano Condivi de la Ripa Transone*, ed. A. F. Gori (Florence, 1746), 9, xiii, cited in Wind, *Religious Symbolism*, 166.

113. The rule of the cloister was enacted in the first Constitutions of the order and reaffirmed in 1507: “Regarding friars who leave the house, they may not travel without a companion nor without permission from the prior. When they travel they are to wear the black habit with the head covered. They are never to go out more than two times per week, unless for some necessity of the house or of a member of the community. No one may be permitted to go out on festival days.” *Analecta Augustiniana*, ix, 66, cited in Gutierrez, *Augustinians in the Middle Ages 1357-1517*, 109.

114. A certain amount of conflict between these different functions was inevitable. The convent was the subject of a number of reforming ordinances. Indeed, in 1401 the Florentine Dieci di Balìa, the magistracy in charge of military affairs, complained about the conduct of the Santo Spirito friars to Boniface IX, who promulgated a warning to the chapter not to involve themselves in secular matters. Walsh, “Papal Policy and Local Reform,” 130.

115. As Weinstein, among other scholars, suggests, historical commentary on the enemies of Savonarola has suffered from a long-standing pro-Savonarolan bias and research on their writings has been limited. Weinstein, *Savonarola and Florence*, 228 and n.3.

Augustinian Hermits and Savonarola grew acute. On June 18, 1497, the papal excommunication of Savonarola was read in five churches of the city, including and Santo Spirito.<sup>116</sup> Already, in March of that year, the Santo Spirito friar and lector Leonardo da Fivizzano, had preached against Savonarola at Santo Spirito. In May, he published a letter in which he described Savonarola as the Antichrist, responsible for spreading discord within Florence and defended papal authority and the hierarchy of the church.<sup>117</sup> At the same time, however, fra Leonardo's political and institutional polemic includes passages that criticize Savonarola for his focus on externalities and his neglect of the interiority that characterizes true devotion.<sup>118</sup> In its dual focus, his letter may reflect some of the complexities of life in a convent affected by the vicissitudes of Florentine history and responsive to its longstanding political affiliation with the papacy, but ultimately reflective of Augustine's own intense focus on individual spirituality.

We may expect that the complexity of Santo Spirito's institutional identity would leave its mark on the art displayed in the new fifteenth-century church. In the grandeur of Brunelleschi's church and the elegance of its chapel decoration, the friars may have seen a *magnificenza* that reflected their understanding of the community's standing in Florence and within the order. The fluid and wide-ranging complexity of the iconography of the altarpieces that I discuss responded to and was a part of the convent's institutional self-awareness and its scholarly sensibility. In certain of its images, as I argue, the

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116. Luca Landucci, Diario fiorentino, critical ed. Jodoco del Badia (Florence: G.C. Sansoni, 1883), 152–53, cited in Capretti, Building Complex, 13.

117. Leonardo da Fivizzano, "Epistola di Frate Leonardo da Fivizzano dell'ordine di Sancto Augustino a tutti e very amici di Iesus Cristo Crocifixo," ed. Achille Neri, Il Propugnatore, XII, II (1879), 230–240; Weinstein, Savonarola and Florence, 229 n. 4.

118. Massimo Petrocchi, Una "Devotio moderna" nel Quattrocento italiano ed altri studi (Florence: F. Le Monnier, 1961). Vanna Arrighi, "Leonardo da Fivizzano (da Vallazzana, da Sorzana)" in Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani (Rome, Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 2003).

convent of Santo Spirito sought to define itself in terms of both its allegiance to the unity and hierarchy of the Church and its adherence to the order's eremitical ideals of solitary study and contemplation. At the same time, the sophisticated iconographies employed in the church's altarpieces reveal an openness to a expressive poetics of the image that, like Fra Mariano's rhetoric, sought a compelling adhesion of the truth to be conveyed and the pictorial *figura* that conveys it.

### C. The Fifteenth-Century Church of Santo Spirito

The involvement of the Santo Spirito friars with their neighborhood and their city and the prominence of Santo Spirito as an institution within the Oltrarno was advantageous to the Hermits in their efforts to initiate the reconstruction of Santo Spirito's thirteenth-century conventual buildings and church. Florence's victory over the Milanese at Governolo on Saint Augustine's feast day, August 28, 1397, impelled the commune to institute an annual contribution for this enterprise.<sup>119</sup> Nothing, however, came of this first effort until 1428, when "one of their masters in sacred theology who calls himself maestro Francesco Zoppo," renowned for his abilities as a preacher and for his piety, addressed the neighborhood in a Lenten sermon, pleading with them to concern themselves with the state of the convent, its *studium*, and its church.<sup>120</sup> As a result of Mellini's appeal, five *operai* were appointed that same year, all wealthy individuals who

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119. Archivio di Stato di Firenze, Provisioni, Reg. 86, a c. 189, quoted in Carlo Botto, "L'edificazione della Chiesa di Santo Spirito in Firenze," *Rivista d'Arte*, 13 (1931): 481; Howard Saalman, *Filippo Brunelleschi: The Buildings* (London: Zwemmer, 1993), 343.

120. *Codice Magliabecchiano*, Biblioteca Nazionale di Firenze. Mag. I., II, 11,3 25, cited in Botto, "L'edificazione," 481. According to Quinterio ("Il complesso di Santo Spirito," 44), Mellini, "detto anche Zoppo," was a Lateran canon and abbot of Grottaferrata invited to speak by the Florentine Augustinian Hermits. He died in Florence in a tragic accident in 1431. It is far more plausible, however, that the Mellini mentioned by the Anonimo Magliabecchiano was the Augustinian Hermit and Florentine Fra Francesco Mellini, discussed above, 26.

owned chapels in the existing church and whose descendants were to patronize the new.<sup>121</sup> In March 1436, a petition from the friars to the priors of the commune resulted in a salt tax appropriation to be disbursed to the church of Santo Spirito beginning in late 1439. The governmental provision that endorsed this appropriation mentions the friars' desire, as soon as the dormitories were finished, to begin work on the new church.<sup>122</sup> In April 1436, "the men of the S. Spirito quarter and the friars of that monastery, meeting together several times concerning the decision that work should begin on the edifice of the church to be made new and more magnificent, appointed six *operai*."<sup>123</sup> Among these *operai* were Giovanni di Tommaso Corbinelli, whose descendants would acquire four chapels in the left transept of the new church, and Neri di Gino Capponi, whose family would own four chapels in the right transept, and who, himself, would be buried in the family chapel in the new Santo Spirito.<sup>124</sup>

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121. Antonio Manetti, The Life of Brunelleschi, ed. Howard Saalman, trans. C. Engass (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1970), cited in Botto, "L'edificazione," 481. Saalman, Filippo Brunelleschi: The Buildings, 343. Subsequently, in 1434, they chose two more trustees. Botto, "L'edificazione," 489; Saalman, Filippo Brunelleschi, 343. The first, Stoldo Frescobaldi, the head of a family who owned property near Santo Spirito and patronized the old church's main chapel, was an Albizzi supporter, while the second, Pietro del Benino, favored the Medici. Burke (Changing Patrons, 67) has argued that the choice of these two trustees demonstrates the friars' interest in balancing powerful factions in uncertain political times. The friars' evident awareness of the complex power dynamics of mid-fifteenth-century Florence and their ability to take strategic action in order to neutralize possible dangers to the convent sheds light on the extent of their abilities in dealing with-- and even manipulating-- powerful patrons.

122. 5 ASF, Provvisioni, 126, c 448, mentioned in Botto, "L'edificazione," 492 n. 1. Accordingly, regular disbursements to the *opera* begin in January 1440, are interrupted in 1442 and '43 and resume the following year. Botto, "L'edificazione," 492; Saalman, Filippo Brunelleschi: The Buildings, 347.

123. Libro di Ricordanze di Francesco di Tommaso di Francesco Giovanni, ASF, Stroziane, II, Fa. 16, v. 13, in Botto, "L'edificazione," 493. Eugenio Battisti, Filippo Brunelleschi: The Complete Work, trans. Robert Erich Wolf (New York: Rizzoli, 1981), 196.

124. Saalman, Filippo Brunelleschi: The Buildings, 346.

It is not clear when Brunelleschi was selected to build the church; however, he seems to have produced a model between 1432 and 1435.<sup>125</sup> While work may have proceeded on the conventual buildings during the 1430s, construction on the church itself appears to have begun only in 1444.<sup>126</sup> Following Brunelleschi's death in 1446, construction continued under the direction of Antonio Manetti and later Salvi d'Andrea. Nonetheless, progress was extremely slow. In April 1446 the first of the church's thirty-three columns was paid for, but it was not erected until May 1454.<sup>127</sup>

During the construction of the new church, the old one remained in use. Notably, it hosted the annual Pentecost play, put on by the *Compania da Santa Maria delle Laude e del Spirito Santo*, nicknamed *il Pippione*, "the big pigeon."<sup>128</sup> In 1471, during a special representation produced in honor of the visit of Galeazzo Maria of Milan, a disastrous fire broke out destroying liturgical books, vestments, altar frontals and "tavole, crocefissi et immagini di devozione," including Brunelleschi's statue of Mary Magdalene.<sup>129</sup> Following this devastating fire, the collection of funds and the work proceeded more rapidly. In 1477–78, the aisles were vaulted and, in 1479, the new building was roofed.<sup>130</sup>

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125. Botto, "L'edificazione," 492.

126. Ibid., 494.

127. Ibid., 494.; Saalman, *Filippo Brunelleschi: The Buildings*, 363.

128. Nerida Newbiggin, "The Word Made Flesh: The *Rappresentazioni* of Mysteries and Miracles in Fifteenth Century Florence," in *Christianity and the Renaissance*, 362–375; Ciolini, "Santo Spirito," 30–31.

129. "At Santo Spirito, after the performance was over, these in charge of the festival went off without a thought for the danger of fire, so that at the fifth hour of the night in the top part of the tower of the fire apparatus broke out and, before anyone noticed, shot up so high that the flame set light to the roof of the church." *Libro Nero di Determinazioni del Convento di Santo Spirito* ASF, CRS, 122, Fa. 67, v. 280, quoted in Botto, "L'edificazione," 483. Battisti, *Filippo Brunelleschi*, 300. The Sacristy, containing Filippo Lippi's Barbadori altarpiece, and Santo Spirito's famous library were spared. Ciolini, "Santo Spirito," 30–31.

130. Battisti, *Filippo Brunelleschi*, 197.

By 1481, offices were held in the church,<sup>131</sup> and a sermon was preached under the new dome on April 20, 1482.<sup>132</sup> The church was not complete at that time, however, since work on the flooring continued until the beginning of 1484. At some point probably between 1483 and 1494, the choir with the main altar at its center was erected under the crossing.<sup>133</sup> In 1489, Lorenzo de' Medici commissioned the new sacristy and entrusted its construction to his favorite architect and a follower of Brunelleschi, Giuliano da Sangallo. It was eventually completed in 1495. In the meantime, Cronaca (1431–98) and da Sangallo collaborated on plans for the vestibule with its elaborate sculpted ceiling under the patronage of Lorenzo's son Piero. The complex formed by the vestibule and the sacristy were finished by 1497.

While it is difficult to distinguish the specific contributions of the friars to the erection of the church from those of other individuals and institutions concerned, it is clear that, beginning with the efforts of Fra Mellini, they were very much involved and extremely persistent both in attracting the support of important Oltrarno patrons and in pressing their cause with the city government. Their role included, as Jill Burke reminds us, the election of the *opera* itself.<sup>134</sup> While the chapter would have been expected to

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131. ASF, CRS, 122, v. 280, quoted in Botto, "L'edificazione," 510, n. 3.

132. Luca Landucci, Diario Fiorentino (Florence: Del Badia, 1883), 41, cited in Alberto Busignani and Raffaello Bencini, Le Chiese di Firenze: Quartiere di Santo Spirito (Florence: Sansoni, 1974), 48.

133. Margrit Lisner, "Andrea Sansovino und die Sakramentskapelle der Corbinelli mit Notizen zum alten Chor von Santo Spirito in Florenz," Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte, 50 (1987): 267.

134. Burke, Changing Patrons, 69 and n. 34. In 1436, the mercantile court, the Mercanzia, charged with disbursing tax moneys to the *opera*, added three members of its own choosing. One of those members, Francesco di Tommaso, writes that the friars and the neighborhood families hoped in this way "to have a stronger mandate." Saalman, Filippo Brunelleschi: The Buildings, 347. Exceptionally, in 1438, the Mercanzia, and not the chapter, actually elected the *opera*. Saalman appears to believe that this was the result of an effort on the part of the friars and their neighborhood supporters to gain the alliance of the Mercanzia, which was, after all, the conduit for their expected revenues. More recently, Burke (Changing

elect members of influential and wealthy neighborhood families, there were still, as we saw, opportunities to make careful and politic selections. Howard Saalman and others have argued that the construction of the new Santo Spirito was a specific instance of the broad demand by the wealthy in fifteenth-century urban centers for opportunities to purchase chapels and to erect family altars.<sup>135</sup> Yet the catalytic role and sustained participation of the Augustinian Hermits in the project suggests that a more nuanced view, which takes into account the interests and effectiveness of the convent involved, would better reflect the several influences at play. The vast space of the new church allowed crowds to gather to hear the masters of theology deliver their sermons, among them probably the famous Mariano da Genazzano. Its grandeur not only expressed the standing of the Augustinian Hermits within their city, their neighborhood, and their order, but also magnified the power and significance of the liturgy performed at the high altar<sup>136</sup> and underlined the exclusion of the broad mass of the lay public from the newly large area that surrounded the friars' choir.<sup>137</sup> The presence of the choir screen, which curtailed physical access, and the sacred character of the space beyond it were thus intensified, as is suggested by a mid-sixteenth-century drawing of the interior of Santo Spirito, now in the Uffizi (fig. 1).

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*Patrons*, 67) has interpreted the Mercanzia's involvement in the vote as an attempt on the part of the commune to increase its power over the *quartiere* of Santo Spirito.

135. Saalman, *Filippo Brunelleschi: The Buildings*, 340; Goldthwaite, "Demand for Religious Art," 123.

136. Nelson, "Memorial Chapels," 358.

137. With the exception, of course, of the lay patrons of chapels that surrounded the choir. Robert W. Gaston, "Sacred Space and Liturgical Space: Florence's Renaissance Churches," in *Renaissance Florence*, 336.

Brunelleschi's architectural practice has been described as the creation "of perfect solutions with minimal means."<sup>138</sup> At Santo Spirito, purity of parts and economy of means are allied in the service of a monumental effect. The thirty-one monolithic columns reflected in the half-columns along the walls dominate the church as a principal ornament, at once stable and dynamic.<sup>139</sup> That dynamic principle is at work as well in the design of the forty shallow side niches that scallop virtually the entire perimeter of the church. Rather than creating the effect of side aisles pierced by chapels, the niches create the impression, at once fluid and highly coherent, of an undulating enclosure.<sup>140</sup> These ubiquitous niches, together with the repetitive rhythms of the monumental arcade, confer on the different components of the church—transept, nave and choir—a singular cohesiveness, an effect emphasized by the unified flow of light from sources located high above human height.<sup>141</sup> The centrality of the overall design combined with the multiplicity of monumental columns allows for uninterrupted views down the nave with a powerful effect of receding perspective. Crucial to the impact of Santo Spirito's architecture is its systematic repetitiveness, its modular consistency,<sup>142</sup> inherited by Brunelleschi, according to Franco Borsi, from the Gothic tradition.<sup>143</sup> At Santo Spirito, as in a Gothic cathedral, the rhythmic repetition of familiar modules punctuated by identical columnar frames, by releasing the viewer from the intellectual effort of tracking visual

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138. Saalman, Filippo Brunelleschi: The Buildings, 358.

139. Battisti, Filippo Brunelleschi, 198.

140. George Holmes, "The Architecture of Humanism," in The Florentine Enlightenment, 201.

141. Battisti, Filippo Brunelleschi, 198.

142. "Every element is standardized, every space equal, everything disposed inflexibly on a grid which is itself based on the simplest unit of measurement." Battisti, Filippo Brunelleschi, 197.

143. Borsi, "Il Santo Spirito di Brunelleschi," in La Chiesa e il Convento, 84–85.



stimuli and by suspending the particularity of spatial reference points, operates rather like hypnosis or meditative praxis, creating a state of consciousness that is at once at rest and heightened in focus. To phrase this differently, the repeated modules of column, arch and niche create a mirroring effect, which ultimately rejects the viewer, throwing her back on herself, but with a heightened state of physical and psychological self-awareness.<sup>144</sup>

Architecture here appears designed to reflect and to enhance the ritualistic tenor of religious life, in which adherence to a settled daily rhythm of activities ideally calms and focuses the mind, allowing concentrated prayer and meditation.<sup>145</sup>

#### **D. The Church Décor**

The church's dominant and perhaps its most original set of repeated modules are the forty identical niches pierced by long vertical windows that scallop its interior perimeter.<sup>146</sup> The niches were clearly intended for altars that would be commissioned by the church's patrons, although the space was too restricted for visible burial

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144. Brunelleschi's emphasis on order and coherence at Santo Spirito is usually discussed as a natural flowering of tendencies inherent in his art. It is tempting as well to see a parallel with Augustine's interest in order and the existence of numerical truth as an Idea in the mind of God. We have no evidence that Brunelleschi took into consideration the fact that he was working for an Augustinian house in his design for the church. On the other hand, the architect's interest in Early Christian practices and his possible relationship with the humanist Camaldulensian monk Ambrogio Traversari, a translator of Greek patristic texts, suggest that he may have been sensitive to Augustinian notions of order as divine Beauty in his design for the church. Battisti, Filippo Brunelleschi, 18.

145. Mary Carruthers has discussed the role of monastic architecture in channeling and thus giving "energy and pattern to the mind's restless movements" (Craft of Thought, 258). She describes the ordered and unadorned architecture of twelfth-century Cistercian buildings as "meditational mechanisms", particularly in their use of moderately sized units easily grasped by the eye. In order to facilitate meditation, monastic space must offer contained paths or channels—for instance the aisle of a church-- alternating with contained stationary loci, such as Santo Spirito's moderately sized chapel-niches. The channel or path allows for a meditative process pursued over time, while the contained spaces prompt focus. Together, according to Carruthers, they permit a meditation that moves continuously forward with occasional pauses for fuller reflection on specific *loci*. Ibid., 254–66.

146. Their importance to Brunelleschi is evident from his intent to preserve the convex shape of the niches on the exterior. This aspect of the original plan was modified after his death. Saalman, Filippo Brunelleschi: The Buildings, 364.

monuments.<sup>147</sup> One important effect of the fifteenth-century altarpiece decoration was to punctuate the existence of the modestly sized chapels so that, to use Gaston's vocabulary, they become distinct "places" susceptible to definition in terms of family display or sacred presence, as opposed to the generalized "space" created by the church contour.<sup>148</sup> The superimposed elements of the essential chapel decor—the altar, a unified altarpiece of moderate size and roughly square in shape, and a long window—form a coherent design in which no one feature intrudes upon or overwhelms the other and where horizontal elements balance the verticals (fig. 8).<sup>149</sup> It is also clear that within each chapel, the elements of the decoration, frame, altar-frontal, curtain, as well as the dimensions of the chapel itself and its window, were all designed to coordinate so that they created the effect of a coherent, unified whole (fig. 6).<sup>150</sup> Originally, the coordination of the chapel decor with the architecture included a careful alignment of coordinated proportions: the altar front was roughly half the height of the retable above it and the retable half the height of the window. The effect was to create a visual and spatial

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147. At least one scholar has suggested that encasing the chapels on the exterior by a wall served the purpose of allowing space for burial. In 1488, the *opera* of Santo Spirito granted permission to the grandsons of Neri di Gino Capponi to break through the chapel wall and install a metal grill to allow visual access to their grandfather's marble sarcophagus carved in 1458 by Bernardo Rossellino. Saalman, Filippo Brunelleschi: The Buildings, 364.

128. Gaston, 340, 341. The role at Santo Spirito of the modestly sized Quattrocento and early Cinquecento altar and altarpiece in defining and giving substance to the chapel and distinguishing it as a specified locus from the space of the church is evident in the chapels' virtual erasure in those areas of the church that are decorated with the extremely large sixteenth century altarpieces visible from far outside the chapels' vicinity.

149. According to Antonio Billi, Brunelleschi originally intended for the altars to be located at the center of their respective chapels so that the priest could officiate from behind the altar, looking out at the congregation, as in early Christian basilicas. If Brunelleschi did in fact intend to implement this design, it is not clear what role, if any, he would have given the altarpieces. Libro di Antonio Billi (1481–1530), ed. F. Benedettucci (Rome: Anzio, 1991), 33, cited in Capretti, "La cappella e l'altare: evoluzione di un rapporto," in La chiesa e il convento, 229–230; Victor Schmidt, "Filippo Brunelleschi e il problema della tavola d'altare" in "L'altare: la struttura, l'immagine, l'azione liturgica. Atti del Convegno (Milano) a cura di M. Boskovitz," Arte Cristiana 80, no. 753, 451–61.

150. Lisner, "Andrea Sansovino," 259.

whole that included not only the window, the framed altarpiece and the altar, but also the gently unfolding walls of the chapel itself.<sup>151</sup>

The unity of the chapel decor was certainly the object of a sustained effort. Detailed connections between its different components are still visible in certain chapels that have retained original fifteenth-century altarpieces and altar-frontals. The Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints Bartholomew, Nicholas of Bari, Bernard and Jerome by the brothers Donnino and Agnolo del Mazziere (fig. 9, no. 29) features a throne edged with a border of classicizing gold vegetation against a black background. The same pattern of gilt vegetation on black appears on the pediment and pilasters of the frame. The dominant gold hue, punctuated with red, of Agnolo del Mazziere's Trinity with Saints Mary Magdalene and Catherine of Alexandria (fig. 6) is prolonged by the gold of the frame, and in the *paliotto*, by the gold pomegranates of the overall design and the red gown of the Magdalene in her gold-framed, gold-backed roundel. Because the design details and principal colors of the altarpiece are extended beyond the panel itself, its dimensions expand visually to encompass the window, altar and altar-frontal. In other words, the pictorial world represented in the altarpiece tends to take over the chapel, an effect that is facilitated by the modest size of the Santo Spirito chapels, which are, architecturally speaking, merely niches. As a result, the viewer, as she draws closer to the chapel, penetrates a domain that is visually dominated and psychologically defined by the altarpiece.

Although it is true that the style of the earliest Santo Spirito frames, which follows the early to mid-fifteenth century format of fluted side pilasters with Corinthian

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151. Capretti, "Antefatti della Controriforma," 45; Capretti, "La cappella e l'altare" 229–30.

capitals (fig. 6), reinforces the effect of a boundary or a portal onto a self-contained world,<sup>152</sup> a later frame format would soon counteract that impression. Introduced in the 1480s, side pilasters with increasingly rich candelabra and grotesques blur the encounter between vertical and horizontal dimensions inherent in the frame format itself and softening the effect of a rigid boundary. As a result, frame and painting merge, facilitating the altarpiece's extension into the chapel. Thus, the Biliotti chapel's Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints Matthew and Jerome (fig. 10, no. 16), executed probably in the mid-1490s, includes painted architectural ornaments and a frame that are similarly lavish and delicate.<sup>153</sup> Together, despite the visual draw of the panel's recessed background, they maintain their hold on the viewer's gaze, ensuring a primary perception of the chapel niche as an expansion and a reflection of the altarpiece.

Nelson, using the quattrocento works still in situ at Santo Spirito as examples, reminds us that altarpieces in fifteenth-century Florentine churches necessarily admitted of a number of different viewpoints.<sup>154</sup> We have imagined a beholder standing, roughly speaking, a few steps back from the threshold of the chapel. If the viewer gazing upon the altarpiece and the chapel was an officiating priest—Nelson's example—he would be stationed within the niche, with an intimate view of the altarpiece's predella and the immediate foreground. On the other hand, if the beholder moved quite far back from the

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152. To some extent, this style of frame replicates the famous "window" used by Leon Battista Alberti to teach drawing in perspective: "Let me tell you what I do when I am painting ... I draw a rectangle ... which I regard as an open window through which the object to be painted is seen." Leon Battista Alberti, De Pictura, 1.19 [1435], On Painting and On Sculpture: The Latin Texts of De Pictura and De Statua, ed. and transl. Cecil Grayson (London: Phaidon, 1972), 55. One consequence of the "window" effect at Santo Spirito is to amplify the painting's self-enclosed character and to draw the viewer into the image and away from the architectural and decorative context of the chapel.

153. The work, given to an unknown master of the Santo Spirito *Conversazione*, was tentatively attributed to a collaborator of Lorenzo di Credi, Giovanni Cianfanini. Gigetta Dalli Regoli, Lorenzo di Credi (Cremona, 1966), 71.

154. Nelson, "Memorial Chapels in Churches," 368.

chapel threshold, his view would give a larger role to the window above the altarpiece, particularly if that window was adorned with a stained-glass image. A sufficient number of windows were, we know, furnished with stained glass to make it evident that this was the ideal expectation of Brunelleschi and his successors.<sup>155</sup> Although very few of Santo Spirito's stained-glass windows remain in situ, those that survive, as, for instance in the ca. 1495 window for the Frescobaldi chapel at the northern end of the church (20, fig. 11), demonstrate how striking such windows would have been when the sunlight brought out their brilliant colors. We should thus recognize that for a viewer standing at some distance from a chapel with a stained-glass window, that window, as much as the altarpiece below it, would visually dominate the chapel space.

The prominence of the altarpiece and the window in the chapel space has implications in terms of the viewer's grasp of his own location. As the viewer gazes into the chapel, the world depicted in the images of the altarpiece and the window is the world into which he or she is ushered.<sup>156</sup> The space of the chapel niche is, in the words of John Shearman, "liminal space" that is "shared" with the altarpiece panel or the window.<sup>157</sup> The chapel locus, thus defined by its images, becomes a transcendent domain occupied by holy figures, a specific embodiment of the Holy Jerusalem, a sacred space. In

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155. The Frescobaldi (20), two Antinori chapels (31 and 36) and the Dei chapels still retain their stained-glass windows. Documented windows of some type were provided by the patrons of the Bardi, Capponi, Biliotti and Pitti chapels, as well as for the nave chapel of the Compagnia dell'Agnolo Raffaello, while historiated windows certainly decorated the Nerli and Velluti chapels and the two Frescobaldi chapels. Capretti stresses that the windows would have been an integral part of the chapel decoration. "Le vetrate delle capelle," in *La chiesa e il convento*, 357–61.

156. He would have been quite literally ushered in by the John the Baptist of the Bardi altarpiece (fig. 5) and, particularly, by the smiling and beckoning Saint Augustine in Raphael's 1508 Dei altarpiece in the nave (fig. 131).

157. Shearman used the term "shared space" to speak of a "fiction of a continuum between the painted space and the real or more specifically liminal space." He used the term "liminal" to "describe the zone of the real space which lies at the threshold of the painted space but is not part of the painted space." *Only Connect*, 59 and n. 1.

addition, because each chapel clearly is, at the same time, a part of the church of Santo Spirito, that church, as well, is identified with the transcendent world pictured in that chapel's images. In discussing specific altarpieces below I suggest in further detail ways in which they strive to manipulate the beholder's experience of chapel space in order to create a reading of the altarpiece that is spatial as well as visual.

The principle of uniformity and coherence that, at least initially, dictated the decoration of each chapel prevailed in the decoration of the church as a whole. The shallow identical chapels in Brunelleschi's design, which make it inevitable that several of them are embraced at once by the viewer's glance, are clearly suited to a single decorative scheme. While we have no documentary proof that such a coherent, unified scheme was imposed on the church, it has been clear to most commentators that it must have existed (fig. 8).<sup>158</sup> There is some evidence that, in fact, the church's *opera* did enforce rules of uniformity in the chapels' decor. Thus, the 1485 record of the *opera*'s deliberations notes that the Velluti chapel (10) is lacking a glass window, and in 1487 that the same chapel required a tomb slab "chome nel altre chapelle."<sup>159</sup>

The altars, which in most cases surmounted a funereal slab, were all of the same dimensions. They were fronted by *paliotti* that featured the chapel's titular saint in a central mandorla against a background that resembled a patterned textile.<sup>160</sup> Judging from the fifteenth-century décor remaining at Santo Spirito or derived from that church, the

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158. Barbara Markowsky, "Eine Gruppe bemalter Paliotti in Florenz und der Toskana und ihre textilen Vorbilder." Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz 27 (1973): 105–128; Capretti, "La Cappella e l'altare," 230; Burke, Changing Patrons, 76–77; Thomas, "Neri di Bicci," 23; Blume, "Studies"; Nelson, "Memorial Chapels in Churches," 367.

159. ASF, CRS 122, 128, fols. 77r and 94 r, cited in Burke, Changing Patrons, 77 n. 69.

160. Markowsky, "Eine Gruppe bemalter Paliotti," 110.

altarpieces were to be painted, not sculpted, furnished with a predella and shaped, as we noted earlier, a unified *tavole quadrate*, a typical design for Florentine altarpieces during the second half of the quattrocento.<sup>161</sup> Such a limitation has a documented precedent at the church of San Lorenzo in Florence, where *tavola quadrata, sine civoriis*, were similarly required.<sup>162</sup> The architectural renovation of the Cistercian church of Cestello in Florence during the second half of the 1480s also clearly involved an effort to impose a uniform chapel design on a preexisting disparate foundation.<sup>163</sup> At Santo Spirito, it appears that all the altarpieces were expected to be roughly square in shape and to include a predella with the patron's arms on either side. They were to be framed so as not to block Brunelleschi's slender window on the wall above. Remaining curtain rods in some of the chapels, as well as relevant documentation, indicate that the altarpieces would have been veiled by a curtain.<sup>164</sup> The chapel window would have been surmounted with the patron's arms. Finally, judging from the altarpieces remaining in situ in their original frames, it is likely that, originally at least, the frames were intended to resemble each other.<sup>165</sup> For instance, in the left transept, the frame of the ca. 1488 Madonna and Child

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161. The prototype for such a squared, unified altarpiece is Fra Angelico's 1438–40 San Marco altarpiece for the high altar of the church of San Marco in Florence (fig. 31).

162. Ruda, "A 1434 Building Programme for San Lorenzo in Florence," *Burlington Magazine*, 120, no. 2 (1978): 358–61. Filippo Lippi's late 1430s Annunciation painted for the Martelli chapel at San Lorenzo is one such *tavola quadrata*.

163. Alison Luchs, "Cestello: A Cistercian Church of the Renaissance" (PhD dissertation, John Hopkins University, 1975).

164. Giovanni de' Bardi's account book includes a payment for the "chortina d'altare," Markowsky, "Eine Gruppe bemalter Paliotti," 130. Andrew C. Blume, "Giovanni de' Bardi and Sandro Botticelli in Santo Spirito," *Jahrbuch der Berliner Museen*, 73 (1995): 176.

165. At Cestello as well, the altarpiece frames were intended to be, at the very least, similar. Everett Fahy, "Les cadres d'origine de retables florentins du Louvre," *La Revue du Louvre et des Musées de France*, 1 (1976), 9. See also H. Von Os, "Painting in a House of Glass: The Altarpieces of Pienza," *Simiolus* 17 (1987): 22–38.

Enthroned with Saints Bartholomew and John the Evangelist in the Ubertini chapel (fig. 12, no. 24) is virtually identical to that given to the Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints Bartholomew, Nicholas of Bari, Bernard and Jerome in one of the chapels owned by the Corbinelli (fig. 9).<sup>166</sup>

Conformity among the church's altarpieces extended—in some cases—to the specifics of their compositional scheme. There is a tendency to symmetry and simplicity, with the number of saints limited to two, one on either side of the central figure.<sup>167</sup> Capretti has argued that this composition, inaugurated at Santo Spirito by one of its earliest altarpieces, Cosimo Rosselli's 1482 Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints Thomas and Augustine,<sup>168</sup> in one of the left transept Corbinelli chapels (fig. 13, no. 26) became a quattrocento prototype for the church's *sacre conversazione*.<sup>169</sup> Rosselli's

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166. It is, however, difficult to judge the intentionality behind the similarity among the church's frames. Frames belonging to a given period necessarily resemble each other, as do, for instance, the ornate frames of two mid-1490 altarpieces at Santo Spirito, The Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints Matthew and Jerome in the Billiotti chapel (fig. 8) and Filippino Lippi's Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints Martin of Tours, Catherine of Alexandria, John the Baptist and Donors (the Nerli altarpiece) (fig. 11). In addition, there seems to have been a particularly stringent effort at uniformity among the chapels of the left transept, four of which were owned by the Corbinelli clan.

167. The limitation on the number of figures in Santo Spirito's quattrocento altarpieces cannot be interpreted as a *retardataire* predisposition fostered by the convent's relative isolation in the Oltrarno and relationships with artists, such as Bicci di Lorenzo and Neri di Bicci, who were to some degree parochial; for a discussion of parochial tendencies at Santo Spirito, see Capretti, "La pinacoteca sacra," 243. The trecento and early quattrocento triptych format had encouraged the portrayal of an array of saints around a central figure, most commonly the Madonna and Child. With the invention of the unified altarpiece in the late 1430s, this grouping was transferred to the unified format and marshaled to either side of the central figure. Thus, Fra Angelico's paradigmatic San Marco altarpiece (supra, n. 130) arrays eight saints and eight angels, four to each side of the enthroned Madonna. Domenico Veneziano's 1440 Saint Lucy altarpiece includes four saints, two to each side.

168. Rosselli's altarpiece, as it now hangs in the church, represents the Madonna between Saints Thomas and Peter. In the seventeenth century, when the chapel changed hands, its new owner substituted Peter for Augustine. The attributes originally given to Augustine, a burning heart and a bishop's staff, were painted over. Capretti, "La pinacoteca sacra," 243 n. 21.

169. The term was coined in the nineteenth century to refer to an altarpiece that depicted the Madonna and Child surrounded by saints. Rona Goffen, "Nostra Conversatio in Caelis est: Observations on the Sacra Conversazione in the Trecento," The Art Bulletin 59, no. 2 (June 1979): 219.



panel depicts the enthroned Madonna flanked by two angels against a paneled wall topped with plants; the two attendant saints stand to either side in the foreground.<sup>170</sup> The entire composition was reproduced in the ca. 1488 Madonna and Child in the nearby Ubertini chapel (fig. 12) and, with some variation, in another Corbinelli chapel in the left transept (fig. 9). It is certainly striking that in the early 1500s, Raffaellino del Garbo painted two *sacre conversazione* for the church designed according to the same model, the 1502 Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints Jerome and Bartholomew for a Frescobaldi chapel in the nave (fig. 19, no. 37) and the 1505 Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints John the Evangelist, Lawrence, Stephen and Bernard in the left transept Segni chapel (the Segni altarpiece, fig. 20, no. 30).<sup>171</sup>

On the other hand, however, Botticelli's Bardi altarpiece (fig. 3, no. 21), executed only three years after Rosselli's work but located outside the left transept, eliminates the angels and replaces the wall behind the figures with an elaborate architecture of plants. Yet, as previously stated, the feature that does appear with some consistency in the quattrocento Santo Spirito *sacre conversazione*, whether or not in the left transept, is the limitation of the saints to two and their placement to the right and left of the foreground. Two paired foreground saints appear not only in the three Corbinelli altarpieces of the left

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170. The walled background with its row of potted plants is characteristic of the early to mid-quattrocento rather than the 1480s. This raises the issue of whether the Corbinelli instructed Rosselli to include features that belonged to a prior work, which hung in a family chapel in the old church and was destroyed in the 1471 fire. The possible existence of such a precedent would support the view, discussed in chapter 5 of this study, that the Corbinelli sought to maintain in the chapels of the left transept a particular compositional scheme and frame design that would function as a family signature.

171. As I will discuss later, although the Segni altarpiece actually includes four saints, del Garbo attempted to recreate Rosselli's composition, by dressing the young saints Lawrence and Stephen in identical deacon's garb so that they take on the role of Rosselli's twin angels. Arguably, the location of the Segni altarpiece in the left transept may have subjected it to particular restrictions. However, Garbo's earlier Frescobaldi *sacre conversazione* in the nave also reproduces the prototype (fig. 15).

transept<sup>172</sup> but also, as we noted above, in the ca. 1488 Ubertini Madonna and Child with Saints (fig. 12); Botticelli's 1485 Bardi altarpiece (fig. 3); Piero di Cosimo's Visitation with Saints Nicholas of Bari and Anthony Abbot, painted in the late 1490s for the Capponi chapel in the right transept (fig. 4, no. 14); and its neighbor, the Biliotti altarpiece, painted in the late 1490s (fig. 10, no. 16). It is possible that this feature referred to lost precedents in the old Santo Spirito. One such precedent, as we have seen, escaped the fire of 1471—Filippo Lippi's much-admired Barbadori altarpiece, which would decorate the new sacristy, just as it had the old. In that work, the Virgin, surrounded by a crowd of angels, is venerated by two saints, Frediano and Augustine, both kneeling in the foreground (fig. 17).

Another unifying feature at Santo Spirito is the motif of the arch. Throughout the church, the arches supported by the columns of the nave reflect the arches of the chapel niches, the grand arches of the crossing and, on a smaller scale, the entrance arch that appears to dominate the rood screen (fig. 1). The altarpieces frequently reflect this arch motif. For instance, the left transept *conversazione* for the Corbinelli and Ubertini chapels (figs. 9, 12 and 13) place the Madonna and Child beneath centered barrel-vaulted niches. In other works, the architectural setting is composed of a continuous set of background arches, as in Botticelli's Bardi altarpiece (21.), Filippino Lippi's Nerli altarpiece (fig. 5, no. 12) and, in a manner that most vividly recalls Santo Spirito itself, Pietro del Donzello's mid-1490s Frescobaldi chapel Annunciation (fig. 18, no. 22). While the arch

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172. The fourth Corbinelli chapel (27) served as the church's Communion chapel and, no doubt for this reason, was exceptionally adorned with a marble altar completed by Sansovino in 1491 (fig. 21), see below, n. 167 and accompanying text.

is a commonly used backdrop in quattrocento painting,<sup>173</sup> the repeated use of the form in the church's altarpieces does suggest an effort to locate the reality depicted in the paintings notionally and physically within Santo Spirito, and thus to endow the church with the sanctity that is the attribute of Mary, the Christ Child, and the saints.

Despite the effort at maintaining decorative unity both within and among the chapels, a number of factors contributed to diminishing its overall effect. There was clearly a desire on the part of the friars and, as well, of the families that had patronized the old church, to introduce into the new Santo Spirito works saved from the old and in some cases replicas from older prototypes. This effort may be seen as part of a broader interest in preserving the past and, indeed, the origins of the Santo Spirito foundation.<sup>174</sup>

We saw that two works from the old Santo Spirito survived the fire; they were both placed in chapels in the area of the church surrounding the high altar. The wooden crucifix of the Compagnia del Crocifisso or de' Bianchi, which had decorated the De' Rossi chapel in the old Santo Spirito since 1398, was transferred to the De' Rossi chapel in the new church also conceded for the use of the Compagnia (no. 11).<sup>175</sup> Similarly, Maso di Banco's polyptych, The Madonna and Child with Saints Mary Magdalene, Andrew Julian and Catherine of Alexandria, which hung in the Vettori chapel in the old church, survived the fire and was transferred to the Vettori chapel in the new (fig. 7, no. 17).<sup>176</sup>

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173. The role of the arch as simultaneously a gap and a link is perhaps most powerfully displayed in Perugino's Vision of Saint Bernard, now in the Pinacoteca in Munich.

174. Thus, the Communion chapel in the new church, as in the old, was dedicated to Saint Matthew, an association likely connected with the origins of the Augustinian Hermit community in the church of San Matteo in Lepore in Arcetri, dedicated to Mary, the Holy Ghost and Matthew. Lisner, "Andrea Sansovino," 207.

175. Capretti, "La pinacoteca sacra," 242.

176. The work is recorded as hanging in the Vettori chapel in the second half of the seventeenth century. Angelo Tartuferi, "L'arte del età gotica" in La chiesa e il convento, 50.

Unfortunately, we do not know how these works were incorporated into the fabric of their chapels. The early seventeenth-century structure that houses the crucifix of the Bianchi in the De' Rossi chapel includes on either side wooden chiaroscuro cutouts of Santa Monica and Saint Augustine. Lisa Venturini has suggested that, instead, Botticini's sharply drawn and expressive cutouts of Monica and Augustine, now at the Accademia in Florence, might have framed the crucifix in the fifteenth century.<sup>177</sup>

We know, as well, that there were efforts at the new Santo Spirito to reproduce works that had existed in the old church. Thus, in 1462, the painter Neri di Bicci had furnished Fra Francesco Mellini of Santo Spirito with a Tobias and the Three Archangels, most probably for the chapel of the Compagnia dell'arcangelo Raffaello in the old church; that work was apparently destroyed in the 1471 fire.<sup>178</sup> The earliest altarpiece to hang in the new church was a new rendition of that work, a Tobias and the Three Archangels painted by Neri di Bicci shortly after the fire for the nave chapel of the merchant Mariotto di Marco Della Palla (no. 7).<sup>179</sup> During the same period, Francesco Botticini executed for the chapel of the Compagnia dell'arcangelo Raffaello in the new Santo Spirito (no. 2) yet another version of the original Tobias and the Three Archangels produced for them by Di Bicci.<sup>180</sup> It is also possible that Botticini's Santa Monica with Augustinian Sisters, which

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177. Lisa Venturini, Francesco Botticini (Florence, 1994), 51. Venturini believes that the female cutout represents not Monica, but the mourning Virgin.

178. Neri di Bicci was an extremely popular artist whose workshop was located in the Oltrarno and who, like his father before him, fulfilled commissions for the Augustinian friars, notably in their efforts to furnish the female houses over which they had supervisory obligations, such as Santa Monaca. His father, Bicci di Lorenzo, received the commission to paint the funeral monument to Luigi Marsili, eventually executed by his son Neri in 1439. Capretti, "La pinacoteca sacra," 241; Thomas, The Painter's Practice in Renaissance Tuscany (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 204.

179. Thomas, Painter's Practice, 310–13 and pl. 15; Thomas, "Neri di Bicci," 29. The work is now in the Detroit Institute of Arts.

180. Capretti, "La pinacoteca sacra," 241 and fig. 3. Botticini's Tobias is now in the Uffizi.

superimposes sharply drawn and individuated late quattrocento physiognomies on a mid-quattrocento walled garden backdrop, replicates, or at least derives from, a lost work originally in the old Santo Spirito.<sup>181</sup>

However, the most significant factor affecting the nature of the Santo Spirito décor and undermining efforts at uniformity is an overall stylistic evolution towards larger size and greater complexity. As we noted earlier, restrained mid-quattrocento frames with fluted pilasters (fig. 13) make way for pilaster frames with painted candelabra (fig. 9), and later decorative motifs densely sculpted in deep relief (fig. 10). By the late 1490s, the altarpiece frames boast imposing cornices and lushly decorated pilasters and friezes as in the Nerli altarpiece (fig. 15). Although the altarpieces maintained till the cinquecento their roughly square shape, they did grow larger. Thus, while Botticelli's 1485 Bardi altarpiece (fig. 3) measures 180 by 185 cm, Raffaellino del Garbo's 1500 Pietà for the Nasi chapel (fig. 26) measures 187 by 197 cm.<sup>182</sup>

At the same time, the limitation on the number of figures appears to have been increasingly burdensome to some of the church's patrons. The *opera* seems to have responded with increasing flexibility. Thus, two Corbinelli patrons insinuate themselves as profiles *en abîme* in the immediate foreground of the late 1480 Madonna and Child with Saints Bartholomew and Nicholas of Bari, in the guise of the additional saints

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181. Thomas, however, in her work on the provenance of the Santo Spirito Mantellate altarpiece, argues that it was transferred to Santo Spirito from Santa Monaca, perhaps by bequest, at a significantly later date. She believes that the Mantellate altarpiece predella would have been transferred to Santo Spirito from an earlier work on the same subject by Neri di Bicci for the Mantellate of Prato. Thomas, "Neri di Bicci, Francesco Botticini," 27–33.

182. Burke, Changing Patrons, 77 and n. 68.

Bernard and Jerome (fig. 9).<sup>183</sup> In Filippino Lippi's mid-1490 Nerli altarpiece, the donors are present in their entirety and the young Saint John the Baptist has been inserted to the left of the Madonna's throne (fig. 5).

More generally, the late fifteenth-century altarpieces that decorate the church illustrate a gradual shift in aesthetic values. Elegance of line and ornamental profusion on an increasing grand scale, visible in the altarpiece frames and the altar-frontals, accompany a similar aesthetic of *copia*<sup>184</sup> and ostentatious elegance in the altarpiece itself, its pictorial treatment of both its depicted content and its underlying themes. In rhetorical terms, we might describe this as a transition from the *genus gracile* or *humile*, a pure or unornamented style, to the *genus vehemens*, a more emphatically rhythmic and ornamented style.<sup>185</sup> One early influence on this evolution may have been the Bardi altarpiece prominently located behind the high altar (fig. 3). The distinctively ornate style of Botticelli's painting with its profusion of diverse vegetation, serpentine and heavily sculpted architectural details, and flickering banderoles inscribed with scriptural references, all at the service of a complex theme, may well have influenced the expectations of the friars and of later patrons. The church's new Communion chapel patronized by the Corbinelli and probably completed by Andrea Sansovino in 1492 (fig. 21, no. 27) may have also exercised an influence on the works commissioned for Santo

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183. There may have been a double objection, on the part of the friars and the *opera*, to the presence of the patrons and to two additional saints. The resulting composition would represent a negotiated solution that would allow the patrons to manifest a reduced presence as profiles *en abîme* in the guise of their onomastic saints.

184. The term, used by Alberti, is derived from classical rhetoric; e.g., Quintilian, *Education of the Orator*, 10.1, in *Classical Rhetoric and its Christian and Secular Tradition from Ancient to Modern Times*, rev. 2nd edition, by George A. Kennedy (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 116.

185. Cicero, *Orator ad Brutum* xxi. 69: "Tot sunt genera dicendi, subtile in probando, modicum in delectando, vehemens in flectendo." Michael Baxandall, *Giotto and the Orators: Humanist Observers of Painting in Italy and the Discovery of Pictorial Composition 1350–1450* (Oxford University Press, 1971), 18.

Spirito during the 1490s and later.<sup>186</sup> It is a highly classicizing marble monument modeled after a triumphal arch. The Christ Child initially stood upon a lunette representing the Coronation of the Virgin, while Saints Matthew and James in niches below were each topped with a tondo displaying respectively Gabriel and the Virgin Annunciate. The densely worked predella narratives contrast with the quieter rhythm and shallower work of the altar-frontal Pietà. The variety of the subject matter, the richness and energy of the carvings, the variety of depths and rhythms involved and, in particular, the profuse and dynamic relief work on the pilasters have, as Margret Lisner suggests, a High Renaissance energy and daring.<sup>187</sup> The quattrocento progression toward ornate elegance may be said to culminate in the barrel vault of the vestibule that leads from the sacristy to the church, finished in 1494 (fig. 22). Il Cronaca, Giuliano da Sangallo, and perhaps Sansovino collaborated on this rich coffered ceiling of *pietra serena*, densely carved with allegories of the cardinal virtues, motifs derived from antique stones, mythological animals and, highlighted by white paint and gilding, five doves of the Holy Spirit, aligned in medallions along the center of the vault.

The formal shift at Santo Spirito has been described in terms of a movement away from a Brunelleschian vision of purity, sobriety, and economy of means.<sup>188</sup>

Brunelleschi's original intentions, which appear to have included eliminating the altar-

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186. The altar to Niccolo di Tolentino commissioned in 1513 by the prior of Santo Spirito, Niccolo Bicchiellini, (3) reflects the composition of Sansovino's earlier sculpted altar for the Communion chapel. Capretti, "La scultura," in *La chiesa e il convento*, 309-334, 330. The Carbonelli Communion chapel was also the locus of devotions of the lay Compagnia delle Laude or Pippione (Compagnia di Santa Maria delle Lodi dello Spirito Santo) of which the Corbinelli were patrons. Thomas, "Neri di Bicci," 26.

187. Margrit Lisner, "Andrea Sansovino und die Sakramentskapelle der Corbinelli mit Notizen zum alten Chor von Santo Spirito in Florenz," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 50 (1987), 256.

188. Capretti, "La cappella e l'altare: evoluzione di un rapporto," in *La Chiesa e il Convento di Santo Spirito a Firenze*, ed. Christian Acidini Luchinat with Elena Capretti (Florence: Casa di Risparmio di Firenze, 1996), 232.

frontals as well as the altarpieces from the chapels, may indeed have been minimalist. It is certainly possible to read the apparent restrictions on introducing sculpture into the chapels as not only an effort to create a uniform decor but also a principled rejection of excessively lavish and ostentatious monuments.<sup>189</sup> However, there is no reason to believe that the *opera* or the friars of Santo Spirito originally subscribed to an austere aesthetic from which they or a later generation deviated. The new Santo Spirito itself was commissioned with the idea that it would be far larger and more impressive than its predecessor.<sup>190</sup> There is evidence that the friars' choir-stalls were elegantly carved and adorned with intarsia motifs (fig. 16).<sup>191</sup> Indeed, the court of heaven described in Filippo Lippi's famous Barbadori altarpiece marries the gray hue of *pietra serena* with dappled crimson and yellow marbles, and fairly pulsates with gilt-studded and gilt-streaked angel wings, brightly hued, gold-encrusted fabrics and the multiple bulbous, tapering finials of Mary's elaborate throne.

### **E. Augustinian Contributions to Santo Spirito**

Judging from this overview of the general features of the Santo Spirito décor, can we speak of a specific influence of the Augustinian friars? Almost all the chapels I have referred to so far are located in the tribune area around the high altar -- in other words, the area behind the rood screen and surrounding the friars' choir, sometimes referred to

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189. Capretti, "La cappella e l'altare," 232.

190. On April 1, 1436, the *operai* were elected with a view to "magnificare e innovare detta chiesa." ASF, Stroziane, Serle II, Fa. 16, c. 13; Botto argues accordingly: "La frase 'innovare e magnificare detta chiesa' e l'altra riguardante il denaro 'da ritenere per tanto edificio insufficientissimo' denotano nello scrivente (the members of the opera) la sensazione precisa della magnificenza e della spesa occorrente per la nuova chiesa ..." "L'edificazione della Chiesa," 493.

191 The illustrated section of the Santo Spirito choir stall (fig. 16) is preserved in the sacristy of San Domenico in Fiesole. Lisner, "Andrea Sansovino," 257.



as *la croce*.<sup>192</sup> Because this was an area of particular importance to the friars, we can safely assume that they supported the efforts at uniformity apparently imposed by the *opera*.<sup>193</sup>

One feature of the decoration that must have been significant to the Hermits is the inclusion of the Santo Spirito dove, which functioned as the emblem of the convent's physical fabric, institutional presence and historical continuity. The large roundel window on the interior façade bears a stained-glass image of the Pentecost, designed by Perugino, a reference not only to the name of the convent but also, perhaps, to the famous Pentecost plays that were held at the old Santo Spirito. The dove in the roundel window complements the two sculpted doves on the pediment and the cornice respectively. Doves with wings extended appear as well on the pilaster reliefs of the Corbinelli Communion chapel. At least two of the fifteenth-century altar-frontals are painted to resemble cloth embroidered with a pattern of doves in descending flight: the *paliotto*, attributed to Bernardo Rosselli, in the Corbinelli chapel of Saint Thomas (fig. 13) and, on the other side of the church, the later altar-frontal in the Biliotti chapel (fig. 10). The dove-patterned painted fabric on the Biliotti chapel *paliotto* is pulled back to either side of its central medallion in a demonstrative imitation of actual fabric. The evident reference to fabric in all the extant quattrocento *paliotti* suggests that their patterns allude to actual fabrics with identical or similar patterns. In fact, given the "coordinated" character of each chapel's decor, it is likely that in those chapels where the altar-frontal was decorated

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192. Burke, *Changing Patrons*, 74.

193. As we have seen, the left transept appears to have been subject to particular restrictions in altarpiece composition, involving some degree of fidelity to Rosselli's 1482 *sacra conversazione* format (fig. 13). It is difficult to gauge to what extent these demands were imposed by the Corbinelli family, wielding its influence on the *opera*, or by the friars themselves, who may have been particularly concerned about the uniformity and formality of the left transept, which housed the Communion chapel.

in the descending dove pattern, the altarpiece curtains were woven or embroidered with the same design.

Do these doves function solely as a claim to identity and status for the Augustinian community, rather like the patrons' coats of arms placed above and in the chapels, or do they testify, as well, to the presence of the Holy Spirit in the church? Mathew A. Cohen has shown that the decoration of the capitals—unlikely to be seen by lay visitors to the church—includes twelve doves.<sup>194</sup> The location of the dove capitals in the vicinity of the main altar follows a triangle shape whose apex is the dove on the central column of the apse.<sup>195</sup> Such a purposeful triangle scheme must allude, Cohen believes, to the Trinity. Augustine's great work on the Trinity, the De Trinitate, and, more generally, the intimate access to divinity in the aspect of the Trinity given to Augustine in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, must have been of great importance to the Santo Spirito friars. They would have been frequent beholders of the Barbadori altarpiece's predella, which displays the saint in his study wearing the habit of an Augustinian Hermit, witnessed by a fellow friar in contemplation of the Trinity (fig. 23). As I discuss in chapter 5 below, the central subject of the Trinity with Saints Mary Magdalene and Catherine of Alexandria, painted in the late 1490s for a chapel adjacent to the Communion altar (fig. 6, no. 28), was almost certainly suggested by the friars. Thus,

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194. Mathew A. Cohen, "The Bird Capitals of the Basilica of Santo Spirito in Florence: Some Observations, and a Proposed Iconographical Interpretation," Quaderni di Storia dell' Architettura e Restauro: Architettura in Toscana Tra '400 e '500, 13–14 (1995): 50 n. 5.

195. This particular dove has a hole drilled in the back of its head, perhaps to hold a metal support for a halo (Cohen, "Bird Capitals," 50 n. 8). Surprisingly, Cohen sees the dove triangle extending from the central northernmost capital of the nave to the furthestmost capitals at the south of the two transepts. However, the two southernmost capitals do not actually bear doves on them. A smaller but accurate dove triangle is formed from the central northernmost capital to the capitals of the two aisle columns to the north of each transept. Such a triangle would outline a space immediately north of the old choir.

there is reason to believe that the friars “read” the doves represented at Santo Spirito, including, no doubt, the doves arrayed on the vestibule vault, as signs, not only of their convent and church, but also of the Holy Spirit and of their own relationship to that Spirit.

Generally speaking, to what extent do the altarpieces of the 1480s and 1490s reflect an Augustinian influence? We know that at least one of the chapels, located in the right transept (no. 9) and patronized by the “Altopascio” branch of the Capponi clan, was dedicated to Saint Monica. Its neighbor (no. 8), belonging to the “San Frediano” branch of the Capponi clan, was dedicated to Saint Augustine. Indeed, the family was able to obtain this chapel only by agreeing to that dedication.<sup>196</sup> It appears to have been furnished with an elegant ca. 1470 polyptych by Zanobi Machiavelli that features Augustine and several Augustinian saints, including Saint Nicholas of Tolentino, Monica, John the Evangelist and Nicolas of Bari.<sup>197</sup> As we have seen, the fourteenth-century crucifix of the

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196. ASF, Notarile anticosimo, G 432 (Ser Giovanni di Marco da Romana): 298r, cited in Thomas, Art and Piety, 56. Botticini’s Santa Monica with Augustinian Sisters not only features the figure of Monica, Augustine’s mother, but also depicts—in a female context—an important Augustinian event, the saint’s transmission of his rule to monastics, as depicted, for instance, in Benozzo Gozzoli’s 1460s Augustine cycle in the Church of Sant’Agostino in San Gimignano. Frederick Van Fleteren and Joseph C. Schnaubelt, “Literary Sources for the Iconography of Saint Augustine,” in Augustine in Iconography: History and Legend, eds. Joseph C. Schnaubelt and Frederick Van Fleteren (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 35–36; Gill, Augustine in the Italian Renaissance, 12. Although the evidence is inconclusive, Thomas has cast doubt on the altarpiece’s presence at Santo Spirito during the fifteenth century (supra, nn. 42, 151). Certainly, the painting’s alliance of a commanding, hieratic center and a lively and informal periphery – a feature reminiscent of the Barbadori altarpiece --and the ambiguity of its spatial context, at once public and private appear at odds with our understanding of norms of social conduct that applied to women, and particularly to tertiaries, in a multi-gendered space. It seems clear, however, that the Santo Spirito Hermits must have approved of its iconography, at the very least to the extent that they agreed to its eventual transfer to their church. This, in itself, raises an array of questions, which I have not attempted to answer here, about the Hermits’ sensitivity to their legacy as the heirs, not only of Augustine, but also of Monica, and, more broadly, about the extent to which chapel space at Santo Spirito could claim to be private space.

197. Christopher Baker and Thomas Henry, eds., National Gallery Complete Illustrated Catalogue (London, National Gallery Publications, 1995. Distributed by Yale University Press), 399. Zanobi di Machiavelli’s polyptych does not conform to the unified square shape apparently required of Santo Spirito altarpieces. It is possible that it hung in the old church and escaped the fire or that it was not yet installed in its chapel when the fire broke out. Thomas argues, albeit tentatively, for the polyptych’s derivation from a

Compania de' Bianchi in the De' Rossi chapel was very likely flanked by wooden cutout figures of Monica—or perhaps Mary—and Saint Augustine by Botticini, now in the Academia in Florence (no. 11).<sup>198</sup> The church includes another quattrocento altarpiece that is distinct in size—it is significantly smaller than the other altarpieces of the same period—style and theme.<sup>199</sup> This altarpiece is the 1475–80 Madonna del Soccorso, attributed to Domenico del Zanobi and hung in a chapel founded long before the church was built by the 1411 will of Pietro Vellutti (10, fig. 25). This work, in which an oversized Mary armed with a truncheon drives a demon away from a small child, appears to be a delicate late quattrocento rendition of an earlier composition. Mary was venerated as the Madonna del Soccorso by the Augustinian Hermits in Spain, Italy and Mexico. The cult derives from the church of the Augustinian Hermits in Palermo, where an image of the Madonna del Soccorso, truncheon in hand, responded with miracles to the prayers of the faithful and was widely venerated.<sup>200</sup> Despite the mid-quattrocento Florentine backdrop of a wall topped with plants, the Santo Spirito Madonna del Soccorso, with its disparately sized figures in somewhat stilted poses, appears to reproduce not only the subject matter but also the composition of the original miraculous image. To the friars' mind, the work may have assimilated some of the sacred power of its original. In his will,

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female community. She may not have been aware of the extreme left and right panels, which feature male saints, including Augustine, or of an associated predella panel that depicts a miracle of Saint Nicolas of Tolentino in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. Thomas, Art and Piety, 54–55.

198. Supra, 141 n. 147; Capretti, “La pinacoteca sacra,” 242.

199. For this reason, Capretti believes that it was originally hung in a different church. “La pinacoteca sacra,” 248.

200. For instance, a 1502 standard bearing the image of the Madonna del Soccorso and attributed to Gerino da Pistoia, now in the Civic Museum of San Sepolcro, came from the sacristy of the church of Sant' Agostino in Borgo Sansepolcro.

Fra Niccolò Bicchiellini, who died as prior of Santo Spirito in 1518, asked that novices pray for his soul at the altar of the Madonna del Soccorso.<sup>201</sup>

Capretti, who has argued for Augustinian influences on a number of later paintings in the church, contrasted these works to the large number of quattrocento altarpieces that depict the Madonna and Child with saints. She described this compositional theme as essentially non-Augustinian and directed primarily at the lay patrician patron.<sup>202</sup> Capretti's dismissal of the *sacra conversazione* as necessarily unrelated to Augustinian concerns may be too sweeping. We know for instance Maso di Banco's fourteenth-century Madonna and Child with Saints Mary Magdalene, Andrew, Julian and Catherine of Alexandria placed in the Vettori chapel in the new church included roundels with images of Augustinian saints.<sup>203</sup> More generally, Ambrogio Lorenzetti's Maestà at Massa Maritima, a deeply Augustinian work in its underlying iconography, includes the enthroned Mother and Child as well as allegorical figures, Augustinian saints and references to the prologue to the Gospel of John—a text of great interest to Augustine.<sup>204</sup> Indeed, in Raffaellino del Garbo's 1505 Segni altarpiece, John

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201. ASF, CRS 122, fol. 200b, cited in Frey, Michelagnolo Buonarroti, 108–9.

202. Capretti, “La Capella e l’altare,” 230; Capretti, “Antefatti della Controriforma,” 45. The prevalence of *sacra conversazione* at Santo Spirito may also reflect the convent’s early dedication to Mary, along with Saint Matthew and the Holy Spirit. From that point of view, a high incidence of images of the Virgin would, here again, assert the continuity of the Santo Spirito community from its origins to its new embodiment in Brunelleschi’s church.

203. The polyptych included a Crucifixion panel above its central image, now located elsewhere within the convent of Santo Spirito, and two roundels containing depictions of Augustinian saints, possibly Nicholas of Tolentino and Anthony of Padua. Angelo Tartuferi, “L’arte dell’ eta gotica,” in Luchinat and Capretti, La Chiesa e il Convento, 50, 54, figs. 5–7.

204. Diana Norman, “‘In the Beginning Was the Word’: An Altarpiece by Ambrogio Lorenzetti for the Augustinian Hermits of Massa Marittima.” Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte 58, no. 4 (1995): 478–503; Diana Norman, Siena and the Virgin: Art and Politics in a Late Medieval City State (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 121–131. Bernard McGinn states that Augustine wrote 124 homilies on the Gospel of John and ten homilies of the first Epistle to the Gospel of John; McGinn, The Foundations of Mysticism:

the Evangelist, seated in the foreground to Mary's right, holds open a book prominently inscribed with the very same text (30, fig. 20).

By and large—and with the exception of the Segni altarpiece—in the *sacra conversazione* at Santo Spirito, the donor's patron saint, also the saint to whom the chapel is dedicated, is placed to the Virgin's right, while an Augustinian saint stands to her left. Thus, Saint Catherine, the object of particular veneration by the Augustinian Hermits as a seeker of both human and divine wisdom, is present on the left in Filippino Lippi's Nerli altarpiece (fig. 5) and in the Corbinelli Trinity altarpiece (fig. 6).<sup>205</sup> John the Evangelist stands to the Virgin's left in Botticelli's Bardi altarpiece (fig. 3) and the Ubertini *sacra conversazione* (fig. 12). Saint Anthony Abbot, who plays a pivotal role for the Augustinians as a model of monastic zeal in Augustine's Confessions and as an agent in the legendary formation of the order,<sup>206</sup> occupies the left foreground in Piero di Cosimo's Capponi Visitation (fig. 4).

Augustine appears as well in the new church's earliest *sacra conversazione*, the Corbinelli Madonna and Child with Saint Thomas and Augustine (fig. 13), located in a particularly honorable position in a chapel adjacent to the Communion chapel. Although the figure of Augustine was painted over to resemble Saint Peter in the seventeenth century when the chapel's ownership changed hands, his name remained engraved on the socle of the Virgin's throne. The outline of the saint's miter can still be hazily distinguished, and there is some blurring of place where one would expect to find

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Origins to the Fifth Century (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2001; repr. 2005), 229; Norman, Siena and the Virgin, 125 and n. 80.

205. Max Seidel, "Die Fresken des Ambrogio Lorenzetti in St. Agostino," Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz, 22 (1978): 202–205. Norman, Siena and the Virgin, 134.

206. Arbesmann, "The Vita Aurelii Augustinii," 341.

Augustine's crosier. The dark patch visible under the new paint on the left side of the figure's chest has been described by Thomas as a burning heart.<sup>207</sup> The burning heart, an iconographic sign associated with Augustine's burning love of God, is significant here in recalling the theology of affect pursued by the Augustinian Hermits.<sup>208</sup> Thus, Lorenzetti's Maestà at Massa Maritima includes the figure of *caritas*, which Augustine defines in the De Doctrina Christiana as the love of God; she is seated at the Virgin's feet and holds up a burning heart.<sup>209</sup> The predella of Rosselli's altarpiece, attributed to Cosimo's brother, Bernardo di Stefano Rosselli, is in part devoted to Saint Augustine. The Bishop of Hippo stands before a landscape blessing a man in a red mantle and *berretta* and a kneeling woman in black.<sup>210</sup> The woman's profile posture suggests that this couple must be the patrons of the chapel, Tommaso do Piero di Agnolo Corbinelli and his wife. Thus, although Saint Thomas, placed to the right of the Virgin in the altarpiece, is Tommaso Corbinelli's onomastic saint, it is Augustine who is shown conferring his blessing upon the couple. The saint here appears fully alive, taking the Corbinelli, perhaps the most important patrons of Santo Spirito, under his protection. The predella image suggests that the patron's purchase and decoration of his chapel and his

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207. Thomas, "Neri di Bicci," 30.

208. "His name befitted the fervor of his love because, as the month of August is fervent with the heat of the weather, so Augustine is fervent with the fire of the love of God." Jacobus De Voragine, The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints, trans. William Granger Ryan, vol. 2 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 117; see also Van Fleteren and Schnaubelt, "Literary Sources," 60.

209. In a 1500 altarpiece from Marienpoel in Belgium, Four Augustinian Canons Meditating beside an Open Grave by the Master of the Spes Nostre, the figure of Augustine also holds up a burning heart.

210. In Capretti, "La pinacoteca sacra," the image is captioned "Storia di Sant Agostino e Santa Monica," 253, fig. 9. This is surely an error. As was well known from Augustine's Confessions, Monica died before Augustine returned to Africa, where he eventually was ordained bishop; therefore the kneeling woman in black cannot be Monica.

relationship with the friars and their church may be understood, not only in terms of a statement of wealth and status—although it was that, certainly, but also as the affirmation of a personal and familial relationship with Saint Augustine and his order.

Finally, the narrative altarpieces hung within the area of the *croce* also reflect what must have been a concerted effort on the part of the Hermits. The area once included five narrative altarpieces, covering four different episodes of the life of the Virgin. Panels depicting the Annunciation (fig. 18, no. 23), painted by Pietro del Donzello in the mid-1490s, and the Nativity (no. 22) executed by del Donzello's workshop after his death in 1509, hung in the adjoining chapels of the Frescobaldi north of the left transept. Biagio d'Antonio's ca. 1495 Journey to Calvary (fig. 14), in which Christ looks back to exchange a sorrowful glance with the prominent figure of the Virgin, was executed for the Antinori chapel in the southeast corner of the left transept (no. 31).<sup>211</sup> Finally, in 1503–05, the Nasi, relatives of the Capponi, furnished their chapel, located next to the Capponi chapel of Saint Nicholas, with a highly emotional Pietà by Raffaellino del Garbo (fig. 26, no. 13). The existence of a narrative cycle focused on Mary in the northern section of the church is strong evidence of the involvement of the Augustinian Hermits in the planning of the decoration, particularly in the area surrounding the high altar. As we noted earlier, the dedication of their church to the Virgin, along with its other dedicatees, Matthew and the Holy Spirit, was, if nothing else, an element of continuity that linked the fifteenth-century Augustinian Hermits of Santo Spirito to two centuries of history and accomplishment.

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191. The clothing worn by the Virgin in the Journey to Calvary (fig. 14) resembles that of the Mantellate depicted in Botticini's Santa Monica with Augustinian Sisters. It is possible that the Antinori wished to commemorate a family member who had joined the tertiary order of the Mantellate. In any case, the effect must have been to add an Augustinian stamp to the image.



Additional understanding of the function and significance of the Santo Spirito cycle of Mary may be surmised from the distribution of the narrative altarpieces among the chapels around the choir. The Frescobaldi Annunciation (no. 23) and Nativity (no. 22) above the left transept and the Capponi Visitation (no. 14) and the Nasi Pietà (no. 13) at the corner of the right transept almost face each other across the width of the church. More importantly, these altarpieces are paired in place in adjoining chapels. The shallow configuration of the chapels at Santo Spirito allows a viewer to study neighboring altarpieces simultaneously. The altarpiece pairings must have been intentional and, made for the benefit of viewers, such as the friars, who would be particularly attentive to subject matter. The combined images may well have served as stimulants to prayer and meditative viewing. Del Donzello's Annunciation (fig.18) and Nativity might, for instance, prompt a meditation on Mary's role in the Incarnation. In turn, the images of the Visitation (fig. 4) and the Pietà (fig. 26), representing respectively the beginning and the end of Christ's sojourn on earth, would encourage the viewer to ponder the entire cycle of his life from the Incarnation to the Crucifixion and to reflect on Mary's involvement in that narrative.

This overview of the decoration of Santo Spirito provides evidence of the friars' involvement in the choices made about the figures to be included in the altarpieces and in the location of altarpieces according to subject matter. In its dealings with patrons and *operai*, the convent had multiple goals: decorating their church as rapidly as possible in a situation where virtually all the artwork had been destroyed; introducing within the new church significant links with the old; taking account of the church dedicatees—the Holy Spirit, Mary and Saint Matthew; and affirming—particularly in the area of the high

altar—their authority and that of their order within the church through the presence of Augustine, his “Augustinian” saints and the dove of the Holy Spirit, the symbol of their foundation. Most importantly, perhaps, it seems that, in addition to the specifically liturgical function played by the chapel altars, the friars wished to define in their church a place or places that would stimulate devotion by encouraging the formation of visual images, which would, in turn, suggest avenues for meditative praxis. In this endeavor, they likely found some patrons particularly accommodating and other patrons willing to concede on issues of subject matter in exchange for the friars’ support with the *opera* on other concerns. In other words, in many chapels the ultimate result would have been a negotiated one, as, for instance, in the Corbinelli Magdalene chapel (fig. 5) whose altarpiece features both Saint Mary Magdalene and the Trinity, a theme with important links to Augustine. On the whole, however, the sustained emphasis on formal decorative unity, enforced at least to some degree by the *opera*, and the existence of an abbreviated program of paired narrative altarpieces focused on the life of the Virgin make it all the more conceivable that the friars would have attempted to create, out of the altarpieces of the tribune, another thematic program involving Augustinian themes.

One work that the friars may have looked upon as particularly their own is the crucifix given to the prior—probably Fra Niccolò Bicchiellini—by Michelangelo (fig. 27).<sup>212</sup> Relatively small in size, carved in wood and painted, the crucifix is both a naturalistic depiction of a young body in death and a delicately plastic and restrained

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212. The crucifix, found in 1962 and subsequently lodged at the Casa Buonarroti, now hangs in the Santo Spirito sacristy. Margrit Lisner, *Il Crucifisso di Michelangelo in Santo Spirito a Firenze* (Munich, 1964); Kathleen Weil-Garris Brandt, Cristina Acidini Luchinat, James David Draper, Nicholas Penny, *Giovinezza di Michelangelo*, catalogo della mostra, Firenze, Palazzo Vecchio-Casa Buonarroti, 6 ottobre 1999–9 gennaio 2000 (Florence: Artificio Skira, 1999), 288–92; Capretti, “La scultura,” 316.

expression of suffering.<sup>213</sup> It speaks in a very different idiom from that employed in roughly contemporary works commissioned in the mid-1490s, Filippino Lippi's Nerli altarpiece and the carved vault of the vestibule, both sophisticated and wide-ranging endeavors laden with classical references. As Capretti has noted, the crucifix, with its modest size, modest material and subdued rhythm, is instead a work in the tradition of the *stile humile*. The crucifix was located, according to Vasari, "above the lunette of the high-altar";<sup>214</sup> in other words, it was placed beyond the rood screen and the friars' choir, in the most prestigious locus in the church. This work's striking simplicity and purity and the authority conferred on it by its location suggest that it represented for the friars an alternative sensibility to that displayed elsewhere, one more quietly and intimately expressive of their aspirations and their spirituality.

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213. Measuring 139 by 133 cm, the crucifix is smaller in width and length than all of the altarpieces I have discussed.

214. Vasari, Le vite de' piu eccellenti pittori, 6:13; Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects, 2: 649.

## II. “Our Mother the Wisdom of God”: Nursing in Botticelli’s Bardi Altarpiece<sup>215</sup>

One of the earliest altarpieces to hang in the new church of Santo Spirito was Sandro Botticelli’s 1484 Madonna and Child Enthroned between Saint John the Baptist and Saint John the Evangelist (fig. 3), commissioned by the banker Giovanni d’Agnolo de’ Bardi for his chapel, which was prominently located opposite the high altar against the northern wall (21).<sup>216</sup> The altarpiece displays a *Madonna lactans* and a lively Christ Child enthroned between Saint John the Baptist and Saint John the Evangelist among an elaborate architecture of carved marble and labeled flowers and foliage. Botticelli executed this altarpiece a few years following his return from Rome, where he had been called by Pope Sixtus the VI, along with Pietro Perugino, Domenico Ghirlandaio and Cosimo Rosselli, to decorate the walls of the Sistine Chapel. His reputation, as well as his mastery of complex compositions and naturalistic *rilievo*, was extremely high.<sup>217</sup> The formal qualities of the Bardi altarpiece --the vivid naturalism of its depicted vegetation, the elegance of its decorative effects and its atmosphere of intense spirituality-- have long

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215. Significant portions of this chapter were previously published as Antonia K. Fondaras, “Our Mother the Holy Wisdom of God: Nursing in Botticelli’s Bardi Altarpiece,” Storia dell’Arte 111 (2005): 7–34.

216. Giovanni de’ Bardi, who spent much of his working life in England, was the extremely successful scion of an old Florentine banking family. At some point between 1483 and 1488, when he died, Bardi returned to Florence, acquired a house and founded the chapel in Santo Spirito. In addition to the altarpiece, Bardi commissioned its frame from the prominent architect and sculptor Giuliano da Sangallo, as well as a stained-glass window, a curtain and a painted *paliotto* for the altar. Of these, only the *paliotto* survives, in situ but partly overpainted. Libro di Entrata e Uscita di Giovanni D’Agnolo de’ Bardi, segnato B, C Bardi Ms. 9, dal 1484–1487 (Florence: Archivio Guiccardini), published in Igino Benvenuto Supino, Sandro Botticelli (Florence: F. Alinari, 1900), 83; Markowsky, “Eine Gruppe bemalter Paliotti in Florenz,” 130 n. 80; Blume, “Giovanni de’ Bardi,” 170–75.

217. Lightbown, 180.

been admired. According to Vasari, the painting was “diligently executed and well finished, containing some olives and palms produced with whole-hearted delight.”<sup>218</sup>

The painting weaves together several different themes within a dense web of iconographic reference. It is an image of the Madonna and Child with two saints, a *sacra conversazione*, comparable to Cosimo Rosselli’s Madonna and Child with Saints Thomas and Augustine (fig. 13) executed, as we saw, for one of the Corbinelli chapels of Santo Spirito. It is also an image of the *Madonna del latte*: Botticelli’s Madonna has parted her gown and holds her nipple at the ready, while the restless Christ Child, apparently interrupted in the act of reaching for her breast, stares solemnly at the advancing beholder. Finally, the setting of this nursing Virgin with saints is composed of plants labeled with banderoles inscribed with scriptural references, specifically to chapter 24 of Ecclesiasticus. The interplay of these different motifs finds its resolution in the iconography, widespread in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, of religious teaching as nursing. That iconography is imaged here in the nursing posture of the Virgin and the half-concealed, engorged breasts of the Christ Child. In substituting Christ’s breasts for those of the Virgin while retaining Mary’s nursing role, the painting articulates the logic that underlies the iconography of nursing as the transmission of Holy Wisdom. It identifies Christ as the milk of Wisdom proffered to mankind and Mary as the allegory of the teaching church—*Ecclesia lactans*—who nurtures humanity.

The painting derives its treatment of the nursing theme ultimately from the thinking of Augustine, his preoccupation with the soul’s absorption of and into Christ

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218. Vasari, Le vite de’ piu eccellenti pittori, *Lives of the Painters*, 1:536. Guido Cornini has argued that the altarpiece is shaped by the emergence of the restless religious sensibility that will fully unfold in Botticelli’s later “Savonarolan” period. Cornini, “Il Savonarolismo nell’ultimo periodo di Botticelli fra ipotesi e realtà,” Storia dell’Arte, 52 (1984): 182.

through his Church, his Pauline inclination to privilege Wisdom in defining the nature of divinity and his intense personal relationship with a nurturing—even maternal—God.<sup>219</sup> The presence of the inscriptions as well as the formality of the composition, the insistent gaze of the Christ Child and the hortatory posture of John the Baptist give the image a didactic character that is entirely appropriate to its theme and, as well, to its location in the church associated with the prestigious *studium* of the Augustinian Hermits in Florence. The altarpiece's iconographic originality and complexity, the thematic counterpart to its elaborate decorative effects and its painstaking naturalism of detail reflect not only Botticelli's own proclivities, but also the character and history of Santo Spirito as a prominent Augustinian center of learning.

#### **A. The Altarpiece and the Chapel**

The altarpiece displays the enthroned Virgin and Child within a garden, flanked by John the Baptist and John the Evangelist. The setting includes a carved marble parapet, tall vases of flowers and olive branches and three types of foliage, each shaped into a tall niche that frames one of the figures. Both the foliage and the flowers bear ribbons inscribed with quotations. The Virgin, at the center of the composition, has parted her gown and holds the nipple of one breast in order to nurse the Christ Child. The Child reaches toward her and, at the same time, turns his head to look out toward the viewer. Saint John the Baptist stands in the foreground to Mary's right, pointing to the Christ Child and bearing on his staff a banderole inscribed "Behold the Lamb of God that taketh away the sins of the World." The aged John the Evangelist, pen and book in hand, stands

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219. Vernon J. Bourke, Augustine's Love of Wisdom: An Introspective Philosophy (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 1992), esp. 122.

to the Virgin's left. Finally, a lidded vase, supporting a tablet painted with an image of the Crucifixion, rests on the lawn at the foot of the Virgin's throne.

The frontality of the altarpiece's composition, together with its walled background and shallow depth, emphasize and dramatize its simplicity—two saints to either side of the enthroned Madonna and Child—a simplicity, which, we have seen, is characteristic of the earlier altarpieces commissioned for the new sanctuary of Santo Spirito. We also saw that Botticelli incorporated the church into the painting, carving out its background plane --typical of a quattrocento *sacra conversazione*-- into contiguous and deep-set niches of vegetation. In so doing, as Jacques Mesnil suggested, he replicated the continuous suite of semicircular, niche-like chapels that Brunelleschi designed for Santo Spirito.<sup>220</sup>

The altarpiece arouses in the viewer feelings of emotional urgency mixed with delight in the painting's lavish aesthetic refinement. To a considerable extent the work owes this highly charged atmosphere to the intensifying effect of its pictorial dislocations—contrasts in style, compositional ambiguities—and to its sustained effort at immediacy of contact with the spectator. Botticelli appears to have derived certain aspects of the painting's composition as well as its overall effect of directness and urgency from the symmetrical and largely static and frontal style of the trecento polyptych. Florentine examples include Andrea Orcagna's 1357 The Redeemer Enthroned with Saints for the Strozzi chapel at Santa Maria Novella or Maso di Banco's Madonna Enthroned with Child and Saints (fig. 7), commissioned for Santo Spirito and spared from the fire that consumed the old church in 1471.

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220. Jaques Mesnil, Botticelli (Paris: Albin Michel, 1938), 112.

The insistent use of symmetry in the Bardi altarpiece is particularly striking. The Virgin and Child, seated under a canopy of tied palm fronds, form a central axis that is reinforced by the cross of palm above the Virgin's head and below by the lidded vessel and the tablet. To either side of Mary, each of them framed by a niche of foliage, stand the two Saints John, their bare feet placed on the painting's marble border. The limitation of the number of saints to two is characteristic, as we have seen, of most of the *sacra conversazione* at Santo Spirito. It has the effect, visible here, of reducing the diversity of physical types, poses and expressions, and thus emphasizes the symmetry inherent in any image of the Madonna and saints. The fact that both saints wear crimson cloaks and share a similar hard-edged, sculptural treatment of their hair and facial features enhances the effect. The symmetry of the composition is reinforced by identical constructs of tiered vases, flowers and olive branches on either side of the Virgin and at the right and left margins of the painting.

The frontality of the objects represented, the absence of oblique lines and the verticality and immobility of most of the figures enhance the effect of order that emanates from this symmetry. The curvatures of the parapet's design and the intricate and varied textures of the foliage decorate the composition without disguising its underlying planar and frontal structure. The three niches of foliage, the base of the Virgin's throne and the figures of the Virgin and John the Baptist all face the viewer directly. While John the Evangelist turns inward slightly, he, like Mary and the Baptist, is firmly enclosed within the frontal framework of the arch and the parapet. In their composure and restraint, all three figures maintain a verticality of form that contributes to the painting's effect of order and regularity. At the same time, with the important exception of the Christ Child,



the figures are captured frozen in sustained poses. John the Evangelist's opened book and suspended pen make the point that, at this moment, all eventual motion is stilled. The flowers, branches and leaves of the garden, bathed, it seems, in the still, golden light of late afternoon, are equally motionless.

Another aspect of the painting's composition that evokes the trecento is its closeness to the surface plane. The two Saints John stand in the very foreground with the parapet and the Virgin's throne only a short distance behind them. The tripartite hedge, which emerges from immediately behind this parapet, rises to the very top of the painting. At the same time, the profusion of the vegetation and the elaborate carving of the marble create an impression of a unified decorated field that keeps the viewer's eye on the surface.

As Landolfi has suggested, the three tall alcoves of vegetation that form the background of the altarpiece create an effect reminiscent of a triple Gothic arch.<sup>221</sup> The triple arch, inherited from the trecento polyptych, shaped the upper margin of unified altarpieces during the late trecento and early quattrocento.<sup>222</sup> One example is the Barbadori altarpiece by Botticelli's teacher, Filippo Lippi, presumably still located in the old Santo Spirito sacristy at the time Botticelli was painting the Bardi altarpiece (fig. 17). I noted earlier the admiration elicited by this altarpiece with its two foreground saints and its possible use as a prototype by the friars.<sup>223</sup> When the triple arch was abandoned in favor of the unified foursquare frame, works such as Domenico Veneziano's 1445–47

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221. Gemma Landolfi, "Natura e artificio nella Pala Bardi: Il tema di Maria Nutrice," in Uomo e natura nella letteratura e nell'arte italiana del Tre-Quattrocento, ed. Wolfram Prinz, 1987 (Florence: Edizioni Firenze, 1991), 163.

222. Goffen, "Nostra Conversatio," 219.

223. *Supra*, 39.

Saint Lucy altarpiece incorporated the framework of the trecento triple arch into the represented architecture of the painting. Filippo Lippi's Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints Francis, Damian, Cosmas and Anthony of Padua (the Medici Novitiate altarpiece; fig. 28), painted for Santa Croce in the late 1440s, also includes a triple arch within the painting. Lippi, however, breaking from the tradition of aligning the figures with the architecture, seated his four saints without regard for the location of the niches above their heads.<sup>224</sup> Botticelli's deployment of the niches to compose the upper portion of the altarpiece and his emphatic placement of his figures within the niches may thus be read as a deliberate use of an outmoded form.

The static, frontal composition of the Bardi altarpiece finds a stylistic match in Botticelli's portrayal of the two Saints John. The particular hard-edged, sculptural style reserved for the saints and their distinct placement—on the marble threshold of the painting and within the frames of separate Gothic arches—allowed him to allude to other artistic forms in which they would play the role of holy intermediaries. We may read them as statues placed before a painted altarpiece, as figures on the wings of a triptych<sup>225</sup> or—to combine both forms—as figures in the side panels of a triptych painted to resemble statues. In either case, the effect of ambiguity created by the suggestion that the saints may be carved images results in an effect of psychological distance despite the fact that both saints are standing in the immediate foreground of the painting.<sup>226</sup> One of the

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224. Jeffrey Ruda, Fra Filippo Lippi (London: Harry N. Abrams, 1993), 163.

225. As in Fra Angelico's Madonna and Child Enthroned between Saints John the Baptist and John the Evangelist (the Linaiuoli Tabernacle) in the museum of San Marco in Florence.

226. Gerardus Van der Leeuw discussed the representation of the sacred in similar terms as the act of concentrating power by fixing an object. Rigidity is necessary to create this effect of frozen power. Abstraction is necessary to create a second reality that distills the essence of the first. Sacred and Profane Beauty: The Holy in Art, trans. David E. Green (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston), 157–59.

paradoxes and the tensions of this distancing strategy is that, once the spectator reads the saints as isolated statues, he or she might then note how communicative at least one of these “statues” appears to be. With his eloquent eyes and his half-open lips, the Baptist belongs to that category of “speaking statues,” celebrated by a common topos of the time, that lack only a voice to gain life or spirit.<sup>227</sup>

Into a painting that is molded by a rigid and symmetrical composition and framed by two sculptures in the flesh, Botticelli has integrated a careful and lavish naturalism of execution. His treatment of the flowers, leaves and small plants of the setting is highly naturalistic. The leaves, in particular, are depicted with the random growth patterns and the minute variety of shape, hue and texture that characterize the natural world. The precision of Botticelli’s work here and his efforts to create an effect of *rilievo* in order to give his leaves greater volume<sup>228</sup> testifies to his concern to create an effect that is both naturalistic and exquisite. In the same way, while profusion of detail and spatial compression contribute to the planar effect of the altarpiece, our illusion of the objective reality of that limited space never wavers. The fall of the light from the left and the front of the painting disturbs the setting’s compositional symmetry with the effect of a real space subject to real light. Spatial depth may be limited, but it follows coherent laws. The shadows cast by the Baptist and the Evangelist clearly situate the parapet and the Virgin’s throne behind them, while the niches of vegetation are carefully carved out with deep shade.

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227. Perhaps the best-known expression of this topos occurs in Dante’s *Purgatorio*, following the poet’s description of a marble relief representing the Annunciation: “One would have sworn that [Gabriel] was saying ‘Ave.’” Quoted in Shearman, *Only Connect*, 114. Hans Belting (*Likeness and Presence*, 351) suggests that the difficulty of balancing the authority of the sacred image against the engaging energy of the rhetorical figure affects Italian religious art as early as the thirteenth century.

228. Lightbown, *Botticelli*, 184.

The pose of the Christ Child—about to nurse, but twisting away momentarily to look at the beholder—is a familiar component of the image of the nursing Madonna in Italian and northern art in both the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.<sup>229</sup> Botticelli has taken advantage of the inherent naturalism of this pose to treat him in an entirely naturalistic manner. Plump and soft, the Child has the snubbed nose, round eyes and rolls of fat of a live baby.<sup>230</sup> He is shown in the act of breaking away from the profile position that would have aligned him with the picture plane. With his agitated legs, his twisted garment, his head and arms straining in opposite directions, the Child creates an effect of natural movement in space that contrasts sharply with the immobility of the other figures.

The artist thus employed two modes of representation: one, formal and archaic, addresses the viewer directly with the authority of the sacred; the other is more fluid, naturalistic and immediate. Both modes of portrayal converge in the figure of the Virgin. Her frontal pose, immobility and elongated verticality of form ally her with the hieratic mode. At the same time, the fluid lines and smooth surfaces with which she is depicted distinguish her from the rigid, sculptural representation of the two saints. Moreover, her gesture of pressing her nipple between two fingers suggests naturalistically the act of nursing in which she is about to engage.

The interaction within the field of the painting of a hieratic pictorial mode and a naturalistic one does not always function smoothly. It also produces areas of ambiguity, in which the coherence of the represented world breaks down. The attentive viewer finds

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229. Millard Meiss, French Painting in the Time of Jean de Bevis: The Late Fourteenth Century and the Patronage of the Dukes (London: Phaidon Press, 1968), 146–47; Leo Steinberg, The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), 14.

230. “The Christ Child is a real little child with a baby’s big head.” Mesnil, Botticelli, 112.

him or herself forced to wrestle, for instance, with the relationship between the two Saints John and the niches behind them. The lower half of the altarpiece displays the two saints as they stand on the painting's marble border. The niches of foliage appear to emerge from behind the parapet some distance away to form the background of the altarpiece. However, the upper half of the painting suggests that the saints stand immediately under the foliate arches, or at least that they are framed by them in the same planar fashion in which the saints of a trecento triptych are displayed under the arches of its frame.<sup>231</sup> Reading the painting from the latter point of view forces us to dissolve the area of lawn and parapet that separates the saints from the background foliage and with it all the illusory substantiality of the world represented in the painting. We are left with an unworkable reality and the need for an intellectual and spiritual, rather than a merely sensory, viewing of the altarpiece.<sup>232</sup>

Like the vegetation of the garden, the inscribed ribbons attached to the branches and flowers are depicted fluttering naturalistically, their inscriptions appearing and disappearing from view with the curvature of the material. As I noted, however, in the Bardi garden the air is perfectly still. Not one leaf stirs, not one petal moves. The ribbons alone ripple in a nonexistent breeze. They are not truly ribbons, of course, but banderoles or, more simply, labels, whose curls and ripples imitate the calligraphy with which they are inscribed. They are displayed in order to be read, so that we can understand, through

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231. A similar moment of optical ambiguity occurs more famously in Veneziano's Saint Lucy altarpiece. Hellmut Wohl, The Paintings of Domenico Veneziano, c. 1410–1461: A Study in the Florentine Art of the Early Renaissance (New York: New York University Press, 1980), 37.

232. Jonathan Goldberg has discussed similar manipulations of the viewer's perceptions by Botticelli and other quattrocento artists in terms of the positive intrusion of spirit into a naturalistic and materialist perception of an external world. "Quattrocento Dematerialization: Some Paradoxes in a Conceptual Art," The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 35, no. 2 (Winter 1976): 153–68.

the verses of Ecclesiasticus, the true nature of the garden as the knowledge of God, given by God.<sup>233</sup> Thus, the specific pictorial contradictions of the painting's setting may be understood as a part of the broader ambiguity created by inserting naturalistic detail into an architectural and abstract composition.<sup>234</sup>

The relationship of the Bardi altarpiece with the other components of its chapel decoration appears to have been carefully coordinated to create the unified effect desired at Santo Spirito. It is clear from the account book of Giovanni de' Bardi that he took care to complete the decoration of his chapel. In addition to the altarpiece, the patron commissioned a frame from the architect and craftsman Giuliano da Sangallo, a stained-glass window, a curtain and a painted *paliotto* for the altar.<sup>235</sup> Only the *paliotto* has remained in situ in the Bardi chapel. It displays at its center the bust of Saint John the Baptist, the chapel's dedicatee, in a landscape framed by an octofoil (fig. 29). According to Markowsky, while the image of the Baptist is original, the gold ground of the altar-frontal was the product of seventeenth-century repainting.<sup>236</sup> The colors of the original altar-frontal, visible in the upper left-hand corner where the over-paint has worn away, appear to be green and red on a cream ground. Markowsky believes that its pattern may resemble the pomegranate design of the *paliotto* in the Cini da Bagnano chapel (fig.

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233. Another instance of pictorial ambiguity is the forward tilt of the upper ledge of the parapet. The perspectival distortion allows the viewer a clear view of the bowls of roses and of the inscribed ribbons wound among them. It also creates a disturbance in that flow of the real. At the very moment in which we perceive the roses, we note that we should not, in fact, be able to do so. The roses are not really perceptible objects but signs that refer to the intangible and invisible idea of the painting.

234. "It is a vegetation that is natural and artificial at once, in which the careful description of reproduced specimens is subordinated to a precise compositional geometry ... an architectonic structure adapted to its sacred theme and thus rich with specific meanings." Landolfi, "Natura e artificio," 163 and n. 25 (my translation).

235. *Libro di Entrata*, cited in Supino, *Sandro Botticelli*, 83; Markowsky, "Eine Gruppe bemalter Paliotti in Florenz," 130 n. 80.

236. Markowsky, "Eine Gruppe bemalter Paliotti in Florenz," 129.

30).<sup>237</sup> If that is true, the foliate design of pointed ovals in the original would have been more restrained, more delicate and more precise, than the current pattern. We may conclude that the original design of the Bardi chapel *paliotto* was very much in keeping with the pictorial style of the Bardi altarpiece itself—an underlying equilibrium, animated by a profusion of detail and executed with great elegance of line. Moreover, the reds and deep greens of the panel and the cream of Christ’s garment would have been extended by corresponding hues in the *paliotto*. There is even an implicit commonality of theme since the vegetation that composes the setting of the altarpiece reappears in the admittedly stylized design of the altar-frontal. As a result, the effect of the actual recession of the altarpiece from the front of the altar and of the imaginary recession created by the painted image—a slight one in the case of the Bardi altarpiece—is attenuated by the visual integrity of the altarpiece and the altar-frontal.

The panel’s frame, executed by Giuliano da Sangallo and now lost, was another crucial component of this unified field. We noted that at Santo Spirito generally it was recognized that the visual integrity of the altarpiece within its frame depended on their formal compatibility.<sup>238</sup>

Thus, in the 1488 Ubertini altarpiece (fig. 12), the gold-on-black decoration around the Virgin’s throne matches the gold-on-black vegetation motifs on the pilasters and frieze of the frame. In the Bardi altarpiece, not only is the setting a garden, but the architectural decoration is composed entirely of vegetation motifs. The requirement that the frame

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237. Ibid.

238. Christa Gardner Von Teuffel has made this point more broadly about Italian Renaissance frames. Review of *La Cornice Italiana dal Rinascimento al Neoclassico*, ed. Franco Salatelli (Milan, 1992), in *The Burlington Magazine* 135 (October 1993): 698–99.

respond to the painting's decorative and architectural motifs suggests that the frame commissioned from Giuliano da Sangallo would have resembled that given a few years later to the Ubertini altarpiece. As a result, the painting, frame and altar-frontal would have formed a composite whole, in which the soft greens and delicate, profuse lines of the painting's vegetation were translated almost insensibly into the decorative vegetation motifs of the frame and the *paliotto*.

The single visual field formed by the altarpiece, the frame and the *paliotto* would have further emphasized the painting's already remarkable suppression of illusionistic space. As it is, not only does the panel lack spatial depth but its figures, all located in the foreground, are thrust out towards us. The altarpiece's limited background space and the closure of that space by tall niches conform to the limited space and closed wall of the chapel behind it. In other words, the universe depicted by the Bardi altarpiece is presented to us as if it occupied the back of the chapel in which we stand. We noted in the first chapter the tendency of the Santo Spirito altarpiece to create a sense of continuum between the space of the painting and the space of a beholder who stands before it. In this case, the foreground placement of the figures and the wall shaped by the background vegetation would enhance that sense of a spatial continuum, allowing the chapel space to substitute for the space that is lacking in the painting. Botticelli has pointedly underlined this effect by introducing a narrow band of shadow in the immediate foreground of the altarpiece. That strip of depicted space and the panel representing the Crucifixion at its center exist within the "real" space of the chapel. Just as the band of marble on which the saints stand can be described as the threshold of the painting, the strip of shadow is the threshold of our space. Using Shearman's language, we can say that the fictive



continuum of the Bardi chapel draws into its embrace chapel space and altarpiece space, including the garden in which the Madonna sits enthroned.<sup>239</sup> Botticelli thus calls upon us to imagine that the painting's *hortus deliciarum*, with its promise of perpetual fulfillment, is actually present within the chapel a step away from where we stand as spectators.<sup>240</sup>

The panel representing the Crucified Christ in the foreground of the altarpiece serves as a link between the painted Christ Child and the sacrificed body of Christ on the altar table below. In other words, it underscores the painting's Eucharistic significance. The tablet may also play the same role as a similarly situated panel, also representing the Crucifixion, in Fra Angelico's San Marco altarpiece.<sup>241</sup> According to Hood, the position of Fra Angelico's tablet is best explained by a passage from The Dialogue of Saint Catherine of Siena, in which the saint asserts that God has built a bridge in the Crucifixion of his Son so that souls can pass safely over to Heaven. The Crucifixion panels used in both paintings may represent such a bridge. As we have just seen, the garden of the Bardi altarpiece exists, in a very concrete sense, within the Bardi chapel in the church of Santo Spirito in Florence. Seeking spiritual nourishment, the viewer thus steps over the body of Christ into the garden of Wisdom that welcomes on earth the

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239. Supra, p. 39, n. 131.

240. Goffen's interpretation of the trecento and quattrocento *sacra conversazione* asserts that the image represents a "holy community" gathered "in caelis" ("Nostra Conversatio," 200). Landolfi concludes that the locus in which that community is represented must be the heavenly realm, to which the viewer, and, in particular, the patron, aspires ("Natura e artificio," 159). The case of the Bardi altarpiece argues for a broader definition of the locus, one that takes account of a "holy community" present in the chapel where the altarpiece is displayed (infra, n. 49). The physical involvement of the painting with the viewer was duly noted by Blume ("Giovanni de Bardi," 177), who does not, however, draw the inference that the depicted action takes place within the chapel and that, as a result, the painting has something to say about the church of Santo Spirito.

241. Small panels representing the Crucifixion or miniature portrayals of the Man of Sorrows adorn the lower register of a number of quattrocento altarpieces whose subject includes the Madonna. Examples include Donnino and Agnolo del Mazziere's Ubertini altarpiece at Santo Spirito (fig. 12) and Botticelli's 1489 Cestello Annunciation, now in the Uffizi. Landolfi, "Natura e artificio," fig. 84.

Christian bent on heaven. In fact, Hood's reading of the tablet is more persuasive in the case of the Bardi altarpiece than in that of the San Marco altarpiece. Unlike Fra Angelico, Botticelli used light and shadow to situate the panel within the spatial gap in the immediate foreground and to lean it against the vase behind it. It is quite clear that the panel is meant to appear present within our immediate space. All we need do is step over the body of Christ to enter the garden.

## **B. Intercession**

Following the lead of Rona Goffen, scholars have been inclined to read compositions figuring the Madonna and Child with saints as intercessory images that convey the intervention of Mary and the saints with the deity in order to secure the donor's entrance into heaven.<sup>242</sup> Barbara Lane has read the presence of the *Madonna del latte* in such compositions as a further sign of intercession: her milk, offered to the viewer, manifests her succor.<sup>243</sup> According to this redemptive narrative, the patron's onomastic saint and the saint of the church in which the chapel has been established call upon Christ whose sacrifice is depicted in the foreground Crucifixion panel. In response, the open-eyed Child turns from his mother's milk to welcome the patron's approach. The saints have successfully interceded and the bared nipple, offered to the distracted Christ

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242. See generally Goffen, "Nostra Conversatio." However, as we have seen, Saint John the Evangelist is also an Augustinian saint who makes a frequent appearance at Santo Spirito. He may play here a dual role as Augustinian saint and secondary onomastic saint.

243. Barbara Lane, The Altar and the Altarpiece: Sacramental Themes in Early Netherlandish Painting (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), introduction and 16.

Child, is extended instead to the donor as an assurance of Mary's own intercessory role.<sup>244</sup>

The list of rich appointments selected by Bardi for his funereal chapel—a stained-glass window, a *cortina d'altare*, vestments and a bookstand and his endowments for personal masses<sup>245</sup>—themselves tell a story of honorable accomplishment that encourages a reading of the painting as Bardi's narrative of intercession. This possible reading, which privileges the religious concerns of the lay patron, may indeed have been formulated by Bardi himself, his relatives, friends and the clergy charged with conducting masses in his memory. Yet, as Blume has noted, an intercessory interpretation of the altarpiece alone feels unsatisfactory.<sup>246</sup> In fact, it leaves a great deal unread, figuratively and literally. Why does the nursing Virgin look down at the Christ Child and not out at the viewer as is usually the case in altarpieces involving the *Madonna del latte*? And what of the scriptural references attached to each of the many plants displayed in the altarpiece? More precisely, why does the Virgin prepare to nurse in an ostentatiously artificial garden decorated with inscribed banderoles?

### C. The Virgin of Wisdom

The inscriptions on the banderoles include the phrase *sicut lilium inter spinas* (as a lily among thorns) attached to the lilies on either side of the Virgin.<sup>247</sup> The inscription

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244. Landolfi has expanded this intercessory reading by interpreting Mary's glance down at the Christ Child as an admonition not to forget who is feeding him. Mary's glance functions as an implicit reference to the double intercession in which Mary displays to God the Father the breasts that nourished the Christ Child, while Christ shows the wounds sustained at Calvary. Landolfi tentatively suggests that the Bardi altarpiece grafts this theme, favored by the Augustinian Hermits, into an image of the Madonna and Child with saints. "Natura e artificio," 160.

245. Blume, "Giovanni de' Bardi," 173.

246. Ibid., 178.

derives from verse 2:2 of the Song of Songs (the Canticle). That verse was interpreted during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance to refer to the unique purity of the Virgin, identified with the spouse of the Song of Songs. The inscriptions attached to the other plants in the painting's setting refer to Wisdom, personified as female and described as flourishing in the land of Israel where God has established her. They derive from chapter 24 verses 17–19 of the apocryphal Old Testament book of Ecclesiasticus, one of the wisdom books of the Old Testament, sometimes known by the name of its author as the Wisdom of Jesus Son of Sirach, or simply Sirach.<sup>248</sup> This wisdom literature dealt with issues of personal morality and welfare within the context of faith in an omnipotent God.<sup>249</sup> In Ecclesiasticus, as in the book of Proverbs, the concept of Wisdom is personified as a female figure who is God's first creation. She emerges as a principle of divine order that reigns in the natural world, as it should in the world of human endeavor.<sup>250</sup>

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247. Translations of the Bardi altarpiece's Latin inscriptions are taken from Lightbown, Botticelli, 182–85.

248. The use of the term apocryphal here derives from a definition specific to Saint Jerome. In Jerome's usage the apocryphal books were those that had been excluded by the Jews from the Hebrew canon adopted in the first century CE. These books were included in the Greek translation of the Old Testament known as the Septuagint. As a result, the early Church accepted those books as authoritative and Jerome included them in his Latin Vulgate Bible. "The Apocrypha: Introduction and The Place and Significance of the Apocrypha," in The Oxford Study Bible, eds. M. Jack Suggs, Katharine Coob Sakenfeld, and James R. Mueller (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 1002–1007.

249. Dianne Bergant, "The Perspective of Wisdom" in The Oxford Study Bible, 172–180.

250. Ibid., 179. The references made in the prologue of the Gospel of John to the "Word that was with God at the beginning" (John 1:1–4) may reflect this Jewish Wisdom tradition. The early Church pursued this association of Wisdom and the Word. For Augustine, Wisdom is not only an essential attribute of God, but also defines, in particular, God's manifestation as Christ, the Word; moreover it is the organizing principle of God's enterprise of creation: "For my part I will begin with confidence from your word in scripture, and cry out: 'How magnificent are your works, O Lord! In wisdom you have created all things (Ps. 103:24). This wisdom is no other than the beginning, and in that beginning, you have made heaven and earth.'" Augustine, The Confessions, trans. Maria Boulding (Hyde Park, New York: New City Press, 1997), XI, 9, 11, 292. Eugene F. Rice Jr.'s summary of Augustine's views is helpful: "Wisdom... is identified with God. As Word it is equated with the Logos, the totality of ideas in the intelligible world. By

Accordingly, the bowls of roses in the Bardi altarpiece have been labeled “Quasi Plantatio rose in iericho” (As a rose-plant in Jericho). The olive branches affixed to the vases are inscribed “Quasi Oliva spezirosa in campis” (As a fair olive-tree in the plains). The lemon tree branches visible to either side of the painting are labeled “Quasi cedrus exaltata sum in Libano” (I was exalted like a Cedar in Libanus)—a reflection of the confusion between the cedar and the lemon tree, both translated by the Latin word *cedrus*.<sup>251</sup> The niche of plaited palms behind the Virgin bears a cross woven of palm leaves labeled “Quasi Palma exaltata sum in Cades” (I was exalted like a palm-tree in Cades). The niche composed of cypress branches behind the Baptist bears the inscription “Quasi cypressus in Monte Sion” (As a cypress tree in Mount Zion). Finally, the niche behind John the Evangelist proclaims, “Quasi platanus exaltata sum iuxta aquam in plateis” (I was exalted as a plane tree by the water by the wayside), although, in fact, the branches bearing that label belong probably to a type of *ilex*.<sup>252</sup> The setting of the altarpiece is thus a garden of plants, each of which, on its inscribed banderole, defines itself as a figure of Wisdom according to the poetic language of Ecclesiasticus 24. In other words, in an integrated *invenzione* that portrays in novel fashion a scriptural text, Botticelli has fashioned a garden out of Wisdom. Such a garden is alluded to by Wisdom’s own voice in Ecclesiasticus 24:41–42: “I also came out as a ... fountain into a garden. I said, I will water abundantly my garden bed.”

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extension it is identified with the Law and the written revelation of Scripture.” Eugene F. Rice, The Renaissance Idea of Wisdom (Wesport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1958), 12.

251. Lightbown, Botticelli, 184.

252. Ibid.; Herbert P. Horne, Alessandro Filipepi Commonly Called Sandro Botticelli (London: George Bell & Sons, 1908), 135–140; Mirella Levi D’Ancona, Botticelli’s Primavera: A Botanical Interpretation including Astrology, Alchemy and the Medici (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1977), 177. Ettlinger, however, claims not to be able to “make any definite botanical identification.” Helen Ettlinger, “The Iconography of the Columns in Titian’s Pesaro Altarpiece,” The Art Bulletin 61 (1979): 64 n. 62.

That Wisdom is the central theme of the Bardi altarpiece was clear to Blume, who, in his 1995 article, linked the Wisdom of Ecclesiasticus 24 to the Virgin at the center of the garden. He did so by identifying the Madonna as a “Virgin of Wisdom” who will nourish the viewer as she has nourished the Christ Child. Blume finds support for this interpretation in a “liturgical tradition” distinct from the “theological tradition ... found in the writings of Augustine and Ambrose.”<sup>253</sup> Identification of the Virgin with the personified figure of Wisdom who speaks in Ecclesiasticus was the subject of medieval sermons, notably by the Augustinian canon Hugh of Saint Victor in the eleventh century<sup>254</sup> and Haymo of Halberstadt in the ninth.<sup>255</sup> The principal impetus for the association was, in fact, the early inclusion of passages from the books of Wisdom in the liturgy of the Virgin.<sup>256</sup> The Little Office of the Virgin, recited at the hour of Matins throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, includes a number of verses from Ecclesiasticus 24.<sup>257</sup> By the ninth century, Ecclesiasticus 24 had been integrated into the

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253. Blume, “Giovanni de’ Bardi,” 180. As Blume suggests, viewers could certainly extract meaning from the pictorial portrayal of a liturgical, rather than a theological, tradition. However, his view that this prominently placed altarpiece in the church of a convent of Augustinian scholars would have departed from Augustinian theological tradition is unconvincing.

254. “Sermo XLVII in Assumptione B. Mariae,” *Patrologiae cursus completus ... series latina*, ed. J. P. Migne (Paris, 1895) 177, col. 1026 (hereafter *P.L.*). Hugh of Saint Victor’s sermon links the Virgin to the plants listed in Ecclus. 24:17–19, each of which is an allegory of a different virtue of Mary. The writer refers only in passing to the central allegory of Wisdom itself.

255. “This reading which is selected from the book of Wisdom, appears to be written in praise of eternal wisdom, by which everything is created. But the erudite catholic fathers command that this part be read in perpetual celebration of the Virgin Mary, from whom likewise the Wisdom of God assumed flesh.” “Homilia V in Solemnitate Perpetuae Virginis Mariae,” *P.L.*, 118, col. 765.

256. David Rosand, “Titian’s Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple and the Scuola della Carità,” *The Art Bulletin* 68 (March 1976): 68 and n. 74; Louis Bouyer, *The Seat of Wisdom: An Essay on the Place of the Virgin Mary in Christian Theology*, trans. A.V. Littledale (New York: Pantheon Books, 1962), 45–47.

257. The Little Office was introduced by Alcuin in the ninth century as a votive Saturday Mass in honor of Mary. It was reorganized by Peter Damien in the eleventh century. By the twelfth, the Office was in daily use throughout Europe and formed the core of the Books of Hours used by the laity. Hood, *Fra Angelico at San Marco*, 107–8.

Office of the Assumption of the Virgin.<sup>258</sup> Hugh of Saint Victor's sermon associating Mary with the wisdom plants of Ecclesiasticus was, in fact, delivered for the feast day of the Assumption of the Virgin. A mid-thirteenth-century gospel book from Brandenburg contains an illustration for that office that clearly portrays the Virgin as Wisdom (fig. 31). Crowned Queen of Heaven, the Virgin holds a banderole inscribed with a verse from Ecclesiasticus 24. From the corners of the image, four Old Testament figures gaze upon her; two—Isaiah and David—are linked to the Incarnation; the other two—Solomon and Sirach, the author of Ecclesiasticus—are associated with the books of wisdom.<sup>259</sup>

Renaissance artists, such as Fra Angelico in his San Marco altarpiece, made use of the connection between the Virgin and the text of Ecclesiasticus, as it had been developed in the liturgy (fig. 32). The mantle worn by the San Marco Madonna is inscribed with a long quotation from Ecclesiasticus 24. The roses of Ecclesiasticus 24:18 hang in garlands to either side of the Virgin's throne. Moreover, the orchard or wood in the background of the painting is composed of the trees mentioned in Ecclesiasticus 24:17–19. Accordingly, Hood, in his analysis of the altarpiece, describes Fra Angelico's Madonna as a "Virgin of Wisdom."<sup>260</sup> An inscription from Ecclesiasticus 24 also decorates the Virgin's mantle in Van Eyck's ca. 1435 Virgin of Chancellor Nicolas Rolin.<sup>261</sup> It should be noted, however, that in both paintings it is Mary as the subject of the liturgical prayer, rather than as the persona of Wisdom, that receives emphasis. Hood

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258. Ettlinger, "Iconography," 61 n. 22.

259. Gertrud Schiller, Ikongraphie der christlichen Kunst, vol. 4, Die Kirche (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1976), 74.

260. Hood, Fra Angelico at San Marco, 108.

261. Carol Purtle, The Marian Paintings of Jan Van Eyck (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), 67–68.

discusses the references to Ecclesiasticus made in the San Marco altarpiece as “a visualization” of the liturgy, specifically of the Little Office of the Virgin.<sup>262</sup> In fact, if the trees of Ecclesiasticus in Fra Angelico’s altarpiece are part of a landscape of low hills and sea, it is no doubt because the opening verses of the Little Office and the Matins hymn included within it refer to Christ’s dominion over the earth and sea.<sup>263</sup> Similarly, Carol J. Purtle defines the presence of the Virgin and Child in Van Eyck’s Virgin of Chancellor Rolin as a “visualized prayer.”<sup>264</sup>

If Mary’s definition as Virgin of Wisdom is inscribed within the liturgy, in what terms does the liturgy formulate that definition? The manner in which the plant allegories of Ecclesiasticus are used in the Little Office of the Virgin affirms the relationship between Mary’s wisdom and her role in the story of human salvation. Lessons 1 and 2 of the Little Office summarize the passages of Ecclesiasticus 24 in which God bids Wisdom “take root” in Zion (Ecclus. 24:10–12). The responses to each of these lessons clarify their meaning, by praising Mary as the one who carried and brought forth the Lord. As discourse, the liturgy thus speaks of Mary’s role as the mother and carrier of Divine Wisdom and as the human component at the heart of God’s plan. The final lesson of the Little Office paraphrases Ecclesiasticus 24:13–18 and thus directly identifies the Virgin with the plants of Wisdom. It is also the culmination of the references introduced in the first two lessons. Divine Wisdom is fulfilled at that moment

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262. Hood, Fra Angelico at San Marco, 107.

263. Ibid, 109. Fra Angelico’s Christ Child is represented accordingly with a mapped orb that defines him as ruler of the world.

264. Purtle, Marian Paintings, 68 nn. 32, 33. Not only does Rolin hold a prayer book open to the first phrase of the Little Office of the Virgin, but a number of the words embroidered on Mary’s hem refer to phrases from the Little Office that do not derive from Ecclesiasticus 24.



when it finds in the Virgin its created embodiment, its human reflection, and descends into her body.

The liturgy's assimilation of the Virgin with the Old Testament figure of Wisdom received impetus from the debate concerning the Virgin's Immaculate Conception.<sup>265</sup> The text of Ecclesiasticus 24 became relevant to the debate, because verses 5 and 14 of that chapter describe the creation of Wisdom by God before all things and thus before the inception of Original Sin: "I came out of the Mouth of the most High, the firstborn before all creatures" (Ecclesiasticus 24:5).<sup>266</sup> The Franciscans argued that, since the Virgin was identified with Wisdom in the liturgy, her creation, free from sin, must have been predestined in the mind of God "before all creatures."<sup>267</sup> By the early fourteenth century, the predestination language of Ecclesiasticus 24 was cited as a positive proof of the Virgin's immaculacy.<sup>268</sup>

As a result, by the last decades of the fifteenth century, artists alluded to the Immaculate Conception by means of quotations from Ecclesiasticus 24 or pictorial

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265. Initiated in northern Europe during the Middle Ages, the dispute spread south during the fifteenth century and at the same time became extremely contentious. The Franciscans ardently defended the view that, unlike any other human being, the Virgin had been conceived free of sin. The Dominicans, the Franciscans' great mendicant rival, claimed instead that the Virgin had been sanctified in her womb after conception. Suzanne L. Stratton, The Immaculate Conception in Spanish Art (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 2–3.

266. "He created me from the beginning before the world" (Ecclus. 24:9). However, the Franciscan Petrus Thomae, who first advanced the text of Ecclesiasticus 24 and its association with Mary as positive proof of the Immaculate Conception, argued that the Virgin's privilege, described by the language "firstborn before all creatures," was of dignity, not of time. Ettlinger, "Iconography," 61.

267. The issue was formally debated a number of times, most importantly at the Council of Basel (1431–37). John of Segovia, speaking for the immaculists, cited the book of Ecclesiasticus as *major auctoritatis* for the Immaculate Conception. The council resolved in favor of the proponents of the doctrine. However, as a result of the schism, Pope Eugenius IV dissolved the council in September 1437 and declared all of its decisions invalid.

268. Rona Goffen, Piety and Patronage in Renaissance Venice: Bellini, Titian and the Franciscans (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), 57.

references to the allegories of that chapter.<sup>269</sup> The late fifteenth-century Immaculate Conception painted by the Lucchese Master of the Immaculate Conception for the church of San Francesco in Lucca (fig. 33) features in its background setting five of the plants mentioned in Ecclesiasticus 24, as well as two urns marked “mirra” and “balsamum,” which certainly allude to the extended allegory of Wisdom as perfume found in Ecclesiasticus 24:20.<sup>270</sup> Another example is Carlo Crivelli’s 1492 Immaculate Conception, now at the National Gallery in London. The painting displays a standing Virgin beneath a banderole inscribed with a paraphrase of the predestination language of Ecclesiasticus 24:5.<sup>271</sup>

There can be no doubt that, both in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the Virgin was considered uniquely wise. Her childhood in the temple, as related in Jacobus de Voragine’s Legenda Aurea, testifies to her precocious intelligence and strength of

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269. Ettlinger, “Iconography,” 64.

270. This altarpiece is of uncertain date. Carmichael suggests “1480 or thereabouts.” Montgomery Carmichael, Francia’s Masterpiece: An Essay on the Beginnings of the Immaculate Conception in Art (London: Kegan, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1909), 29. Sybilla Symeonides argues that it was painted after 1494. Symeonides, “An Altarpiece by the Lucchese Master of the Immaculate Conception,” Marysias 8 (1959): 65–66. Ettlinger (“Iconography,” 64 n. 61) disagrees, but believes that the work must date after 1481. Because many of the features of the painting’s background landscape are not labeled, it is not always clear what the painter intended to represent. Symeonides describes the L-shaped enclosure surrounded by roses as a tomb. While the enclosure may allude to Mary’s tomb, it is also a *hortus conclusus*. The mysterious line running down the back of the enclosure is quite probably a water-course or a fountain, reflecting Ecclus. 24:30–31: “I also came out ... as a conduit into a garden. I said, I will water my best garden.” The fact that Francesco Francia, who derived his own 1511 Immaculate Conception from this earlier work, placed a basin set about with roses at the same spot in his composition gives some additional support for this interpretation.

271. “Ut in mente dei ab initio concepta fui ita et facta sum” (I was conceived in the mind of God from the beginning and thus was I made). Titian’s 1538 Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple at the Accademia in Venice is a later immaculist work studded with references to Ecclus. 24. Rosand, “Titian’s Presentation,” 67.

character.<sup>272</sup> The open book, an attribute of the Virgin Annunciate, makes its appearance, near the Virgin or open on her lap, in many other contexts. The numerous Italian examples include Botticelli's 1493 Madonna del Padiglione (fig. 34); Luca Signorelli's Holy Family of 1490, in which two prominent books appear to distract the Virgin from her Child; a mid-1490s fresco of uncertain attribution, The Madonna and Child with Saint John and Angels (fig. 35), now in the National Gallery in London;<sup>273</sup> and Raphael's Madonna and Child with the Young Saint John in the National Gallery in Washington.

Here again, however, Mary's wisdom, conveyed by the act of reading, is associated with her role as the mother of Christ and participant in the story of salvation. An open book displayed in the hands of the Christ Child ordinarily asserts Christ's nature as Logos, or Divine Wisdom.<sup>274</sup> In the hands of the Madonna, the book is the Bible in which the Virgin confirms her foreknowledge of God's plan of redemption and her role within this plan.<sup>275</sup> A Burgundian statue of a reading Virgin and Christ Child, dating from

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272. In his sermon for the Assumption day of the Virgin in 1427, the popular Franciscan preacher Saint Bernardino of Siena held forth about the intelligence of the Virgin: "Mary had so much knowledge of the sky and what was contained within it that there never was a creature that knew as much as she ... She knew all the trees, all the grasses, all the plants, all the leaves, all the animals." Bernardino of Siena, Le Prediche Volgari di San Bernardino da Siena, ed. Luciano Bianchi (Milan: Tip. Edit. all'inseg. di S. Bernardino, 1936), 11-12.

273. The authorship of this fresco is in dispute. Michael Hirst has argued that it is an early work of Michelangelo. Michael Hirst and Jill Dunkerton, Making and Meaning: The Young Michelangelo (London: National Gallery Publication, 1994). However, see N. Dacos, "Il 'Criado' portoghese di Michelangelo: Il Maestro della Madonna di Manchester ossia Pedro Nunes," Bollettino d'Arte 78 (1993): 29-46.

274. Purtle, Marian Paintings, 12.

275. Craig Harbison, Jan Van Eyck: The Play of Realism (London: Reaktion Books, 1991), 80; Gigetta Dalli Regoli, La preveggenza della Virgine: Struttura, stile, iconografia, nelle Madonne del Cinquecento (Pisa: Pacini, 1984), 10-13. Mary's prophetic abilities were explicitly described by Savonarola in his 1494 Good Friday sermon: "She was learned in scripture and knew the prophecies that the prophets of Christ foretold ... and she was so radiant with the light of prophecy, more than the other prophets ... and thus she knew that her little son had to suffer... this passion." Prediche supra Job (Venezia, 1545), 374ff., quoted in Charles de Tolnay, Michelangelo: The Youth, vol. 1 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1947), 127-28.

1415 and now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (fig. 36), bears a scroll inscribed with the creation language of Ecclesiasticus 24:5: “Ab initio et ante secula creata sum” (He created me from the beginning before the world).<sup>276</sup> The inscription is believed to refer to a passage in the open book which the Virgin is reading and to which the Child points emphatically, while he looks up at his mother’s face.<sup>277</sup> With the help of her divine Child, Mary reads about her own predestined creation by God and her own nature as Wisdom. Mary’s wisdom is thus framed and defined by her understanding of God and her own significance to God’s plan. Thus, Saint Bernardino, speaking of the Virgin’s *cognoscimento di Dio*, claimed that it surpassed all the abilities demonstrated by all the prophets and patriarchs:

Do you think that she understood the essence of the Divine? Yes, yes, yes. And just as you see by the light of the sun, thus Mary saw by the light of her intelligence, which was always in accord with the will of God. And by that very light Mary looked at herself and saw the will of God, and just as soon as she had seen God’s will she set out to fulfill it.<sup>278</sup>

Mary’s foreknowledge is both a synecdoche for her wisdom and that wisdom’s essential part.

The wisdom of Mary is thus intimately connected with her role in the cycle of salvation. That cycle itself, according to Saint Paul, is Divine Wisdom’s essential manifestation. “Jews demand signs, Greeks look for wisdom, but we proclaim Christ nailed to the cross ... he is the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor. 1:22–

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276. William Forsyth, “A Fifteenth-Century Virgin and Child Attributed to Claux de Werwe,” Metropolitan Museum Journal 21 (1986): 50 n. 26. The inscription suggests that the “Virgin of Poligny” is an immaculist work. In fact, the Poor Clares, for whom the statue was commissioned, were a Franciscan order and thus proponents of the Immaculate Conception.

277. William D. Wixom, “An Enthroned Madonna with the Writing Christ Child,” The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art 57 (1970): 287–301, 301 n. 65; Forsyth, “Fifteenth-Century Virgin,” 48 n. 20.

278. Bernardino of Siena, Le Prediche Volgari 14–15.

23).<sup>279</sup> Mary—created wisdom—is the instrument of God’s Wisdom.<sup>280</sup> Paul refers more than once to Christ, the second person of the Trinity, as Holy Wisdom—“Christ Jesus who of God is made unto us wisdom and righteousness (1 Cor. 1:30). Augustine, following Paul, asserts that Holy Wisdom is the essential state of being of all three persons of the Trinity and of the Trinity as a whole.<sup>281</sup> Christ, “the Word made flesh” (John 1:14), reveals himself as the manifestation of that Wisdom to humanity: “Christ is made wisdom, because he was made man.”<sup>282</sup> Mary is thus, literally, the carrier of Divine Wisdom as it is incarnate in Christ.<sup>283</sup>

In the medieval image of the *sedes sapientiae* (fig. 37), the Child, seated on the Virgin’s lap, wears a philosopher’s robe and carries a scroll; he is portrayed as Wisdom.<sup>284</sup> The Virgin, by analogy with the throne of Solomon, is the seat or support of Christ, Divine Wisdom incarnate. Ordinarily, the Virgin in a *sedes sapientiae* is much

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279. Augustine refers to this passage from the first chapter of Corinthians in his discussion of Divine Wisdom in *The De Trinitate*, XV, S, 31, trans. Edmund Hill (New York: New City Press, 1991), 420. See also Bourke, *Augustine’s Love of Wisdom*, 122.

280. “The Church sees our Lady as the predestinated [*sic*] par excellence, on whom the divine Wisdom comes down to make of her a first created realization of himself.” Bouyer, *Seat of Wisdom*, 46.

281. “And so the Father is wisdom, the Son is wisdom, the Holy Spirit is wisdom; and together they are not three wisdoms but one wisdom; and because in their case to be is the same as to be wise, Father and Son and Holy Spirit are one being.” Augustine, *The Trinity*, VII, 2, 6, 224.

282. *Ibid.*, VII, 2, 4, 222. Following Augustine, Bede, in the eighth century, described Christ as “The Wisdom of the Lord who assumed flesh in which he could be seen.” Adolf Katzenellenbogen, *The Sculptural Programs of the Chartres Cathedral: Christ Mary, Ecclesia* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1959), 15.

283. Ilene H. Forsyth, *The Throne of Wisdom: Wood Sculptures of the Madonna in Romanesque France* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972), 24.

284. The iconography of the *sedes sapientiae* is derived from the typology of Christ as the new Solomon, propounded in medieval times by Guilbert of Nogent and Saint Peter Damian. According to Guilbert of Nogent, “The Wisdom of God the Father is itself Solomon, who made for himself a throne of ivory, when he established his seat in the Virgin, superior to all in her chastity.” *De laude s. Mariae*, c. 3; *P.L.* 156, cols. 541ff.

larger than her Child; he occupies her lap as if he were seated in a niche. What is conveyed by these interlocked forms is the necessity of Mary, Christ's human counterpart, to the presence of the Logos made flesh.<sup>285</sup> The location of the Virgin at the heart of the Christian story of human redemption was particularly important to Saint Augustine, who appears to have been acutely conscious of humanity's dual nature as both male and female and of the need for both sexes to be redeemed. In the De Questionibus, for instance, he asserted:

It was necessary that the liberation of man should be made manifest in both sexes. Therefore, since it was fitting that He should take the human of man, the more honorable of the two sexes, it remained for the deliverance of the female sex to be shown by the fact that this man should be born of a woman.<sup>286</sup>

Thus, the Bardi Madonna's status as a "Virgin of Wisdom" must be understood primarily in terms circumscribed by the liturgy, which was first responsible for assigning Mary that status. She is "the *mother of fair love*, and of fear, and of knowledge, and of holy hope."<sup>287</sup> Her wisdom is inseparable from her profound involvement in the unfolding of the story of humanity's redemption.

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285. Some of the *sedes sapientiae* bear the telling inscription "In gremio matris Residet Sapientia Patris" (In the lap of the mother dwells the Wisdom of the Father). Katzenellenbogen, Sculptural Programs, 109 n. 42. Haymo of Halberstadt introduces his homily in praise of the Virgin by quoting Ecclus. 24:14, because it is from Mary that "the Wisdom of God assumed flesh." Katzenellenbogen, Sculptural Programs, 29 n. 59.

286. Augustine, De Diversis Questionibus, 83, 11, cited in Kari Elisabeth Børrenson, Subordination and Equivalence: The Nature and Role of Woman in Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, trans. Charles H. Talbot (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1981), 74. Børrenson (Subordination and Equivalence, 74–75) notes Augustine's frequent reference to the notion of Mary's role as a representative of the female sex and to the consequent necessity of her participation in the narrative of redemption—e.g., De fide et symbolo, iv, 9; De Agone Christiano, 22, 24.

287. Hood, Fra Angelico at San Marco, 108.

#### **D. The Virgin Immaculate**

Lightbown's interpretation of the Bardi altarpiece is based on the inscriptions in the Bardi garden, which he reads as direct references to contemporary beliefs in the Immaculate Conception.<sup>288</sup> As we have seen, it is clear that, by the date of the Bardi altarpiece, the allegorical language of Ecclesiasticus 24 had been firmly associated with the doctrine and the worship of the Virgin Immaculate. In 1477, Pope Sixtus IV had approved the first and most widely used of two offices for the Feast of the Immaculate Conception. It was written by Leonardo Nogarolis, apostolic protonotary, and included the language of Ecclesiasticus 24 in its first nocturne. Moreover, the office began with the citation of the Song of Songs 2:2: "Sicut Lilium inter spinas...", the altarpiece's sole plant reference that does not derive from Ecclesiasticus 24. Traditional exegeses of the Song of Songs had long associated the bride, described here as a lily, with the Virgin. The verse was thus cited in the Office of the Immaculate Conception in order to distinguish the immaculate Virgin from all who surround her, thorns marked by Original Sin.

By the time the Bardi altarpiece was commissioned and painted, the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception had made important inroads with the religious and political establishment of Florence. The Signoria had required, on pain of fine, attendance at the 1440 celebratory office for the Conception of the Virgin, held at Santa Maria del Fiore. Moreover, in 1448, a large sum was raised by public allocation to erect a church in honor of the Conception of the Virgin.<sup>289</sup> The Augustinian Hermits had initially opposed the

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288. Lightbown, Botticelli, 184. He is supported by Ettlinger ("Iconography," 50).

289. Laura Dal Pra, "'Publica disputatio peracta est:' Esiti iconografici della controversia sull'Immacolata Concezione a Firenze," Medioevo e Rinascimento, 2 (1988): 269.

notion of the Virgin's Immaculate Conception under the influence of Giles of Rome, early in the fourteenth century.<sup>290</sup> However, by the late fifteenth century, the friars appear to have adopted a favorable view of the doctrine.<sup>291</sup>

Lightbown and Ettlinger base their "immaculist" reading of Botticelli's painting not only on its explicit references to the plant imagery of Ecclesiasticus 24, but also on the two lilies on either side of the Virgin marked "Sicut Lilium inter spinas," the opening verse of Leonardo Nogarolis' Office for the Immaculate Conception.<sup>292</sup> Mirella Levi D'Ancona took an opposite view, arguing that, without the explicit predestination language of Ecclesiasticus 24:5, "I came out of the mouth of the most High, the firstborn before all creatures," the identification of the Virgin with the plant allegories of Ecclesiasticus could not be construed as supporting her Immaculate Conception.

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290. While Augustine himself was often portrayed as defender of the doctrine, in fact he reserved judgment. In his treatise *De Natura et Gratia* (36:42), he addressed the issue briefly: "Except for the Holy Virgin Mary, about whom, out of honor to the Lord, I want no question made when sin is being treated, for how do we know what further grace to completely conquer sin may have been bestowed upon her ..." Quoted in Nancy Mayberry, "The Controversy over the Immaculate Conception in Medieval and Renaissance Art, Literature and Society," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 21, no. 2 (Fall 1991): 218.

291. Wenceslaus Sebastian, "The Controversy over the Immaculate Conception from after Scotus to the End of the Eighteenth Century," in *The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception: History and Significance*, ed. Edward Dennis O'Connor (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1958), 228–241, 221. Already in 1340, the Augustinian Hermit Herman of Schildis had written a treatise attempting to prove that Mary could not have born and mothered Christ if she had been conceived tainted by Original Sin. The subject matter of at least one other altarpiece commissioned for the Augustinian Hermits of Santo Spirito during the 1480s, Domenico di Zanobi's *Madonna del Soccorso*, was associated with popular beliefs in the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin. Capretti, "La pinacoteca sacra," 248.

292. Lightbown suggests, in addition, that the labeling of each of the plants in the painting may derive from an immaculist iconography that had recently emerged (Botticelli, 184). He must be referring to the image of the *Tota pulchra es*. This iconography consists of fifteen symbols of the Virgin, each identified by an inscribed scroll, gathered around the figure of Mary, who is usually depicted standing without the Christ Child. Of the seven labeled plants in Botticelli's painting, four are displayed in the image of the *Tota pulchra*. Eleven other motifs characteristic of the *Tota pulchra* are not present in Botticelli's painting. Maurice Vloberg, "The Iconography of the Immaculate Conception," in O'Connor, *Dogma of the Immaculate Conception*, 475–80, fig. 8. Despite these differences, the common use of labeled references does suggest the possibility of a common iconographic source.



It is true that the use of the plant allegories of Ecclesiasticus 24 does not alone signify an immaculist position. As we have seen, these allegories had been employed in the liturgy throughout the Middle Ages to celebrate the Virgin and her role in the Incarnation.<sup>293</sup> They appear in works that do not argue for the Immaculate Conception, such as Fra Angelico's San Marco altarpiece, painted for the high altar of a Dominican church. However, Lightbown and Ettlinger rely not only on the plants' presence, but also on the pointed emphasis that their sheer number and their precise labeling contribute. Moreover, Nogarolis' use in 1477 of the *lilium inter spinas* reference to open his widely used Office of the Immaculate Conception suggests that by 1485, verse 2:2 of the Song of Songs had been linked to the immaculist position.

Levi d'Ancona also objected that representations of the Virgin Immaculate do not include the Christ Child, and that images of the Madonna and Child are specifically focused on the Incarnation.<sup>294</sup> However, a categorical distinction between paintings that focus on the Incarnation and these that celebrate the Immaculate Virgin seems misleading, since Mary's role as the bearer of Divine Wisdom was instrumental in encouraging the development of immaculist views. For instance, Saint Fulbert of Chartres (d. 1028), who helped establish the celebration of the Virgin's nativity, reasoned that she must have been pure in body and spirit in order to bear and give birth to Divine Wisdom.<sup>295</sup> He drew support from verse 1:4 of the Wisdom of Solomon: "For Wisdom

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293. Hood, Fra Angelico at San Marco, 107–8.

294. Levi D'Ancona, Botticelli's Primavera, 177–79. Exceptions to Levi D'Ancona's rule include Giovanni Bellini's Virgin and Child with Saints, painted for Santa Maria dei Frari in Venice. In that painting, the figure of Saint Benedict, whose order first accepted the doctrine, holds up an open book inscribed with the first verse of Eccles. 24.

295. Katzenellenbogen, Sculptural Programs, 10.

will not enter into a malicious soul, nor dwell in a body subject to sin.” The argument that the Virgin owed her exemption from Original Sin to her role as the Mother of Christ was made early and insistently. The point was emphasized in Nogarolis’s Office for the Immaculate Conception, which included, as well, all the references to the plants, symbolic of Mary, that are displayed in the altarpiece.

The altarpiece’s garden setting provides another context for defining the importance of the Virgin Immaculate within a cycle that includes the Original Sin of Adam and Eve as well as Christ’s work of redemption. The lush abundance of the garden evokes the original garden of Paradise, site of Eve’s *cupiditas* and humanity’s fall. In the Bardi garden, however, Mary, impelled by *caritas*,<sup>296</sup> gives her son the food that is her own body. The contrast is made clear in a ca. 1380 panel, attributed to Carlo da Camerino (fig. 38), which displays the nursing Virgin above a recumbent Eve who holds an apple between her fingertips. Similarly, the nursing Christ Child in Jan Van Eyck’s Lucca Madonna (fig. 39) holds an apple up to his mother’s breast in reference to the contrast between Eve and Mary.<sup>297</sup>

The definition of Mary as the new Eve who participates with Christ, the new Adam, in the process of redemption was made early.<sup>298</sup> Its formulation by Saint Augustine was particularly influential: “Here lies a great mystery. Because just as death

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296. In the De Doctrina Cristiana, Augustine distinguishes *cupiditas*, love for the sake of possessing the object that is loved, from *caritas*, love for the sake of God. In the same work, he repeatedly defines God himself as *caritas*. Thus, an act of *caritas* is an act committed for the sake of love itself.

297. Purtle, Marian Paintings, 104. Purtle mentions, as well, a small panel by Van der Weyden (ca. 1432), now in Vienna, that represents a nursing Virgin and a Christ Child with an apple.

298. Notably by Justin (103–165) and Irenaeus (died 202).

came to us through a woman, life was born to us through a woman.”<sup>299</sup> For the immaculists, the opposition of Eve and Mary made clear the integral role played by Mary in God’s plan and the necessity for her Immaculate Conception.<sup>300</sup> Immaculist images of Mary as the redeemer of Eve’s sin rely on implicit rather than explicit imagery.<sup>301</sup> Nevertheless, in the Bardi altarpiece, as in the Lucca Madonna, the latent presence—negative and negated—of the earthly Paradise and of Eve argues for the necessity of Mary and for her divine predestination.<sup>302</sup>

It thus seems very likely that Lightbown is correct in claiming that the Virgin of the Bardi altarpiece is an *immaculata*. Nevertheless, questions remain: Why is Mary shown about to nurse the Christ Child? And why is that act of nursing such an important focus of the painting?

### E. Nursing as the Transmission of Wisdom

The relationship between the portrayals of Divine Wisdom displayed by the Bardi Madonna and Child and by the garden in which they nurse has a pictorial precedent in the affinities that tie the garden of Venus in Botticelli’s Primavera with the presiding figure

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299. Augustine, De Agone Christiano, 22, 24, cited in Børrensen, Subordination and Equivalence, 75. The idea was also disseminated in a well-known sermon by Albertus Magnus, the Maria Thronus, which compares the Virgin’s womb to a Paradise for Christ, the new Adam. Purtle, Marian Paintings, 104.

300. Harbison, Jan Van Eyck, 79; Charles De Koninck, “The Immaculate Conception and the Divine Motherhood, Assumption and Coredeemption” in O’Connor, Dogma of the Immaculate Conception, 365.

301. The earliest example may be a mid-fifteenth-century sculptured program in the cloister of the Cathedral of Barcelona. A representation of Adam and Eve leaving Paradise adjoins an image of a young woman, her hands joined in prayer, standing outside the gate of Paradise. An angel appears to be greeting her from inside the gate. Stratton, Immaculate Conception, 10, figs. 2, 3.

302. It is possible that the palm canopy, surmounted by a palm cross, that shelters the Virgin in the Bardi Garden is displayed as a sign of victory against the sin of Eve. The palm commonly symbolizes victory or triumph, often in the context of martyrdom. It serves as a symbol of victory, in a quite different context, on the reverse of Leonardo’s portrait of Ginevra de’ Benci. Mary D. Garrard, “Leonardo da Vinci, Female Portraits, Female Nature,” in The Expanding Discourse: Feminism and Art History, ed. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 63 and n. 24.

of its goddess. Charles Dempsey has shown that the supreme value of love, embodied in the character and beauty of Venus, subsumes the qualities evoked by the setting of the Primavera: beauty, blossoming abundance, and joy.<sup>303</sup> The Bardi garden, in turn, is a rhetorical discourse about Wisdom, and its qualities—abundance, perpetual greenness, formality and dignity—that evoke those values that are associated with Wisdom: “honor and grace” (Ecclus. 24:22). Similarly, the figures of both Madonna and Child portray, but also literally embody, values linked to the character of Wisdom—beauty and delight, nurture and fulfillment. At the same time, the identification of the Bardi garden with the Garden of Wisdom evoked in Ecclesiasticus does not exclude—indeed it subsumes—other gardens of perpetual bliss, most importantly the garden of the Canticle. From the Canticle, the Bardi garden derives the “lilium inter spinas” and the enclosure that makes it a *hortus conclusus*. The placement of the *Madonna lactans* under a niche of palms brings to mind as well verses 7–8 of chapter 7 of the Canticle: “Statura tua assimilata est palmae, et ubera tua botris” (Thy stature is like to a palm tree and thy breasts to clusters of grapes). Finally, Mary’s nursing posture recalls another references to the beloved’s breasts in the Canticle: “Thy breasts are better than wine” (1:2b) and “We will love thy breasts more than wine” (1:3c). The nourishment promised by the olives and lemons of the Bardi wisdom garden is proffered ostensibly by the *Madonna lactans* in its midst. Offers of fruit and milk reflect the language of Wisdom’s call to its devotees in Ecclesiasticus 24:26, 29: “Come unto me, all ye that be desirous of me, and fill yourselves with my fruits.”

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303. Charles Dempsey, The Portrayal of Love: Botticelli’s Primavera and Humanist Culture at the Time of Lorenzo the Magnificent (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

The trope of Wisdom as the nourishment of the soul is a commonplace of the religious literature of late antiquity and the Middle Ages.<sup>304</sup> It appears with particular frequency in the writings of Augustine. For instance, in the Confessions he describes his state of mind during his student days in Carthage as one of “inner famine”:

I was inwardly starved of that food which is yourself, O my God. Yet this inner famine created no pangs of hunger in me. I had no desire for the food that does not perish, not because I had my fill of it, but because the more empty I was, the more I turned from it in revulsion. My soul’s health was consequently poor.<sup>305</sup>

More famously, Augustine made use of the trope in his account of the religious experience he underwent with his mother at Ostia:

We arrived at the summit of our own minds; and this too we transcended, to touch that land of never-failing plenty where you pasture Israel for ever with the food of truth. Life there is the Wisdom through whom all these things are made, and all others that have been or ever will be.<sup>306</sup>

Augustine’s language, like Botticelli’s painting, expresses a sharply focused spiritual meaning through concrete and compelling images of spiritual thirst followed by perpetual fulfillment—food is truth. The promise of flowing milk in a setting of branches laden with fruit is the pictorial equivalent of Augustine’s “never-failing plenty.”

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304. Carruthers, Craft of Thought, 164. For instance, Bernard of Clairvaux introduces his sermons on the Song of Songs with an extended meditation on the feeding of the soul through the interpretation of scripture. The Works of Bernard of Clairvaux, vol. 2, On the Song of Songs 1, trans. Katharine Walsh (Spencer, MA, 1971), Sermon 1, 2–3.

305. Augustine, The Confessions, III, 1, 1, 75. “‘What about the soul,’ I asked. ‘Is there no food proper to the soul? Or do you think that knowledge is its nutrition?’ ‘Obviously,’ said our mother. ‘I believe that the soul is not nourished except by the understanding and knowledge of things.’ When there was a buzz of questioning about this point, I asked: ‘Do you not concede that the souls of wise men are by far richer and greater, in their way, than the souls of the uneducated?’ ‘This is obvious,’ they replied. ‘Then we state correctly that the souls of people not scientifically trained and unfamiliar with the liberal arts are, as it were, hungry and famished.’” Augustine, The Happy Life, trans. L. Schopp (New York, 1948), 53–54.

306. Augustine, The Confessions, IX, 10, 24, 227.

Just as nourishment generally stood for spiritual sustenance, the act of nursing from the breast stood for a spiritual feeding of particular intensity, in which the nourished soul took on the helplessness and dependency of an infant.<sup>307</sup> For the infant, suckling involves the immediate satisfaction of an imperative physical need, while, for the child and its mother or nurse, it is associated with a uniquely intimate relationship. It is not surprising that nursing would function as a metaphor for spiritual nourishment of the most necessary and most precious kind.<sup>308</sup> The most influential textual source for the nursing trope was probably Paul's assertion in 1 Corinthians 3:1–2: "I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ. I have fed you with milk; and not with meat." Both the trope itself of nursing as teaching and the distinction between the nursing of the young in spirit and the feeding of the more mature were to have a broad application. Origen interpreted verse 1:3 of the Song of Songs—"We will be glad and rejoice in thee, remembering thy breasts more than wine"—to refer to the bride whose breasts are full from Christ's "fullness of spiritual teaching."<sup>309</sup> In his Tractate 97 on John 16:12—"I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now"—Augustine discusses Christ's words in light of Paul's nursing language in 1 Corinthians 3:

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307. A friend once wrote to Augustine, "If I may say so (I) ... cling as wholeheartedly as I can to you, and gain my strength from the overflowing richness of your breasts." Cited in Peter Brown, Augustine of Hippo (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 201.

308. The jocular remark concerning his nurse, the wife of a stone cutter, attributed to Michelangelo by Vasari—"I sucked in with my nurse's milk the chisels and hammer with which I make my figures"—takes on its full value in light of the original equation of nursing and the acquisition of knowledge. Vasari, Le vite de' piu eccellenti pittori, Lives of the Painters, 2: 643.

309. R. P. Lawson, Origen: The Song of Songs Commentary and Homilies. Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation 26, eds. Johannes Quasten, Joseph C. Plumpe, Walter J. Burghardt, and Thomas Comerford Lawler (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1957) bk 1, 87–88, cited in McGinn, Foundations of Mysticism, 122.

In the mind, that is, in the inner man one grows ... not only so that one may go from milk to solid food, but also so that one may more and more take solid food itself. But one does not grow in the expansion of size but in the enlightenment of intellect; for in fact the solid food itself is intellectual light.<sup>310</sup>

In this case, Augustine interpreted a child's nursing as the lesser understanding of novices to the faith. Elsewhere, he applied the Pauline distinction to differentiate the soul's understanding in this life from the ultimate nourishment it will receive in the next: "Faith nourishes us with milk, so to speak, while we are babies in the cradle of this temporal life."<sup>311</sup> Applied to both intellectual and religious learning, the connection between nursing and spiritual nurturing persisted from late antiquity through the Middle Ages.<sup>312</sup> Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, deeply influenced by Augustine, and perhaps the most widely read medieval writer in Renaissance Florence,<sup>313</sup> wrote repeatedly of nursing as an offering of spiritual or moral guidance: "We must ... feed the needy with the milk of doctrine," he asserted,<sup>314</sup> and to a fellow Cistercian, he wrote, "I nourished you with milk when, while yet a child, it was all you could take."<sup>315</sup> Bernard's friend William of St.

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310. Augustine, Tractates on the Gospel of John 55–111, trans. J. W. Rettig (Washington, DC, 1994), tractate 97, 201.

311. Augustine, On Christian Teaching, trans. R. P. H. Green (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 39.

312. Gertrud Schiller believes that the figure of speech "to drink the milk of philosophy" was known to the Middle Ages through Boethius. Schiller, Ikonographie der christlichen Kunst, 4:86.

313. Dale Kent, Cosimo de' Medici and the Florentine Renaissance: The Patron's Oeuvre (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 84.

314. Bernard of Clairvaux, The Works of Bernard of Clairvaux, vol. 3, On the Song of Songs 2, trans. K. Walsh (Kalamazoo: University of Michigan Press, 1976), sermon 41, 208.

315. Bernard of Clairvaux, Letter 1, The Letters of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, trans. B. S. James (London, 1953), 7; P.L., cit., vol. 182, col. 72.

Thierry made use of the nursing trope in his exegesis of the Song of Songs, applying the Pauline distinction to the division between this life and the next:

When their time comes ... may their mouths never be accounted unworthy to kiss your mouth in the fullness of your perfect knowledge, their mouths to which, at the time of their trials and their patience, by means of those breasts, you offer the milk of your heart as the food of spiritual science.<sup>316</sup>

The trope of nursing as teaching makes a pictorial appearance in medieval religious imagery: a twelfth-century pen etching from Strasbourg displays *philosophia sapientia* nursing the seven Liberal Arts (fig. 40). A similar image in the Abbess Harrad von Landsberg's late twelfth-century Hortus Deliciarum represents Philosophy crowned and enthroned at the center of a flower with seven petals (fig. 41).<sup>317</sup> Once again, a citation from Ecclesiasticus 24 makes clear that the figure of Philosophy is also *Sapientia*, Holy Wisdom. From the breasts of Wisdom flow seven streams that feed the seven Liberal Arts who surround her, one to each petal. The connection between wisdom and the nursing breast persisted well into the Renaissance. As Wind pointed out, Michelangelo's Cumaean Sybil on the Sistine ceiling is represented with immense breasts that refer to the food of salvation --and, we might add, the milk of knowledge-- with which she nourished the world.<sup>318</sup>

The broad tradition that identified wisdom with the food of the soul and nursing with spiritual teaching in turn informed the iconography of the nursing Virgin. As we noted earlier, in Florence itself, during the late quattrocento a number of important

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316. William of Saint Thierry, Exposé sur le Cantique des Cantiques, ed. J. M. Dechanet, Serie des textes monastiques d'Occident (Paris, 1962) 8, chap. 38, 122; trans. Mother Columba Hart, The Works of William of Saint Thierry, vol. 2, Exposition of the Song of Songs, Cistercian Fathers Series 6 (Spencer, MA: Cistercian Publications, 1970), 30.

317. Harrad of Landsberg, Hortus Deliciarum, eds. A. Straub and G. Keller (Strasbourg, 1901).

318. Edgar Wind, Michelangelo's Prophets and Sibyls, British Academy, Annual Lecture on Aspects of Art, 1960 (London, 1977), 68.



altarpieces featured the *Madonna lactans*. Filippino Lippi's 1485 Madonna and Child with Saints Jerome and Dominic (fig. 42), an almost exact contemporary of the Bardi altarpiece, ties Mary's nursing specifically to the spiritual nourishment of doctrinal guidance. In the foreground of the painting, the Virgin is seated nursing the Christ Child between two saints, while the background landscape features contextual elements for each of the three figure groups: a lion behind Saint Jerome, Joseph and his ass on the path behind the Virgin and behind Saint Dominic a building that may be a convent. The stooped, rounded silhouette of the kneeling Saint Dominic, absorbed in his book as if in prayer, exactly parallels the curve of the Virgin's shoulders as she leans over to nurse her Child. To drive the point home, the artist has matched the color and shape of Dominic's cowl with the color of the lining of Mary's cloak and the shape of its fold over the Virgin's shoulders. These twin images visually equate the Virgin's nursing and the prayerful reading that sustains Saint Dominic. At the same time, the Christ Child, in a position exactly parallel to Dominic's book, is identified as the Holy Wisdom that Dominic acquires. The mother bird feeding her young in the oak tree above the nursing pair—their heads streaked black and white in imitation of the Dominican habit—adds emphasis to the symbolism of nursing as nurturing and teaching. Appropriately, the role of nursing as learning –acquiring wisdom—is thus featured in two contemporary altarpieces painted for two mendicant orders with a similar interest in and reputation for learning.

Ghirlandaio's ca. 1490 Madonna and Child with Saints Dominic, Michael, John the Baptist and John the Evangelist (fig. 43) makes similar associations between nursing and the teaching of wisdom. The Christ Child grasps Mary's bare breast and, at the same

time, gazes down at Saint Dominic. Dominic looks out at the spectator and points to the open book he is holding, inscribed “Saint Dominic taught them discipline and knowledge.”<sup>319</sup> The metaphor of nursing as spiritual guidance works both ways here. Just as the Virgin nursed the Christ Child, Dominic nursed his order. Botticelli’s 1493 Madonna and Child with Three Angels (the Madonna del Padiglione; fig. 34) equates explicitly the milk of the Virgin with the Wisdom that is Christ. On her knees, gently pressing her breast, the Virgin expresses a stream of milk towards the Christ Child, who appears to call forth or welcome the milk by gesturing in the direction of her breast. An open book lies propped up in the background, visible between mother and Child. If we read the painting as a planar surface, as if it were a text, that book reveals itself the focus of the figures’ interaction. The Child points toward the book, the Virgin touches it, and even the angel who sustains Christ looks towards it. Most importantly, the faint stream of milk from the Virgin’s breast disappears once it passes in front of the book. The identification of Mary’s milk with the Word—Christ’s Wisdom as it is transmitted to the world—could not be clearer.

In the Bardi altarpiece, as well, breast and book are allied. Here, the parallel poses of the Virgin and John the Evangelist highlight the *lactans* symbolism of instruction and guidance: just as Mary, fingers around her nipple, is ready to nurse, John, hand lifted and pen between his fingers, is ready to write. At the moment when Mary’s milk—Holy Wisdom—begins to flow, John will put pen to paper and the Holy Word will pour onto the page.

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319. George Holmes, Florentine Enlightenment, 179–80.

## F. Christ as Mother

The Christ Child's emphatic gesture of reaching for—or pointing to—Mary's breast signals to the viewer the centrality of nursing to the meaning of the painting. At the same time, the movement of the Child's arms provides a glimpse of his own breasts, round and full as if engorged with milk (fig. 44).<sup>320</sup> We might mistake this part of the Child's anatomy for developed pectoral muscles if, elsewhere, Botticelli hadn't given the Christ Child a baby's soft, yielding flesh. Comparisons with other infants painted by Botticelli confirm that, in this instance, the Child's breasts are full. The Cupid of the Primavera, whose breasts are also partially revealed, displays a toddler's flat chest and round stomach (fig. 45). The Christ of the Virgin and Child with Eight Angels (fig. 46), whose covered lower body and raised arm resemble that of the Bardi Christ Child, displays only the slightest swelling of the chest.

Scholars who have studied the Bardi altarpiece have overlooked the full breasts of the Christ Child, probably because the artist has embedded them with extreme discretion within a familiar and highly naturalistic image, the nursing Christ Child who turns to look at the observer, perhaps so as not to disrupt the decorum of that naturalism. The Christ Child with full breasts is not unique to this painting. Jan Gossaert executed several versions of a Madonna and Child with engorged breasts. In one such work, dating from 1527 (fig. 47), the Child leaps out as if to embrace the viewer while Mary presses one of his breasts to express the milk. Gossaert's Virgin and Child may be understood as the

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300. The breasts of Christ have not been identified, not only because they are largely concealed by Christ's arm, but also because the artist depicted them in a particularly unnaturalistic manner as paired spherical objects placed high on Christ's chest, an anatomically incorrect location that recalls the placement of the Virgin's breasts in fourteenth-century representations of the nursing Virgin (e.g. fig. 38). Botticelli apparently dismissed the possibility of a naturalistic depiction of a baby with engorged breasts and, instead displayed a lively, highly naturalistic Child whose plump arm hides virtually all of the problematic features of his anatomy.

counterparts of the Madonna and Child in Filippo Lippi's Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints Francis, Damian, Cosmas and Anthony of Padua (the Medici Novitiate altarpiece; fig. 28). In the latter case, it is the monumental Christ Child, entirely male in his muscle-bound corpulence, who actively expresses his mother's milk out at the human viewer.<sup>321</sup>

The engorged breasts of the Bardi Christ Child affirm his identity as Divine Wisdom. He is, in Augustine's words, the Wisdom who "pastures Israel for ever with the food of truth." He is the Wisdom who calls out in verse 19 of Ecclesiasticus 24: "Come to me, all ye that be desirous of me, and fill yourselves with my fruit." Encountering verses 1–2 of chapter 1 of the Canticle—"For your breasts are better than wine, smelling sweet of the best ointments"—Origen, writing in the third century, proffered an intellectual interpretation: the wisdom and knowledge poured forth from Christ's breast for the soul or bride are worth more than the wine she was given by the law and the prophets.<sup>322</sup> Similarly, in his commentary on the Canticle, the twelfth-century Cistercian William of St. Thierry speaks of the breasts of Wisdom, that is the breasts of Christ, the Word:

It is your breasts, O eternal Wisdom, that nourish the holy infancy of your little ones and bear witness that your presence will not be wanting to them until the consummation of the world.<sup>323</sup>

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321. Megan Holmes, arguing for a problematic ambivalence in the treatment of Mary's breast in Renaissance art, describes the Christ Child in this altarpiece as "tweaking the lactating Virgin's nipple." "Disrobing the Virgin: The Madonna Lactans in Fifteenth-Century Florentine Art," in Geraldine A. Johnson and Sara F. Mathews Grieco, eds., Picturing Women in Renaissance and Baroque Italy (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 177. However, Renaissance nursing images are precise in their use of gestures. Handling the nipple of a nursing breast does not cause milk to flow. What Jesus is doing is holding the Virgin's entire breast in his hand so as to express the milk for us, the spectators. The Christ Child performs a similar gesture in Biagio D'Antonio's 1470–72 Virgin and Child with Angel now in the Baltimore Museum of Art.

322. Lawson, Origen, 62–70, cited in McGinn, Foundations of Mysticism, 122.

323. William of Saint Thierry, Exposé, 30.

The trope of Christ as mother, much discussed as a feature of the theology of Julian of Norwich,<sup>324</sup> has scriptural antecedents in Christ's own portrayal of himself as a "hen, gathering her chicks under her wing" (Matt. 23:37)<sup>325</sup> and in the Pauline equations of nursing and teaching. It is now clear that the theme had a long history in the literature of early Christianity and the Middle Ages.<sup>326</sup> The mothering of Christ—protective, compassionate and nurturing—prominently included an invitation to nurse from Christ's "breasts" or from the wound at his side. The Cistercian Aelred of Rievaulx encouraged recluses to meditate on the crucifix: "An image of the Saviour hanging on the cross ... pours out to you from its naked breasts the milk of sweetness in which you find consolation."<sup>327</sup> In his exegesis of the Song of Songs 1:1–2—"for your breasts are better than wine, smelling of the sweet of the best ointments"—Saint Bernard, like Origen before him, attributed those breasts to Christ, the bridegroom: "These two breasts are two proofs of his native kindness: ... This twofold sweetness of inward joy overflows from

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324. A. Cabusset, "Une dévotion médiévale peu connue. La dévotion à 'Jesu Notre Mere,'" Revue d'Ascétique et de Mystique 25 (1949): 523–45; E. Colledge and J. Walsh, eds., A Book of Showings to the anchoress Julian of Norwich (Toronto, 1978); Caroline Bynum, Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); V. M. Lagorio, "Variations on the Theme of God's Motherhood in Medieval English Mystical and Devotional Writings," Studia Mystica 8, no. 2 (Summer 1985): 15–37.

325. I Thess. 2:7.

326. In a series of articles, Ritamary Bradley has traced the patristic roots of Julian of Norwich's theology of Christ as mother. She has concluded that Augustine was the predominant influence on Julian's treatment of this topic. Bradley, "The Motherhood Theme in Julian of Norwich," 14th-Century English Mystics Newsletter 2 (December 1976): 25–30; Bradley, "Patristic Background of the Motherhood Similitude in Julian of Norwich," Christian Scholar's Review 8 (1978): 101–113; Bradley, "Mysticism in the Motherhood Similitude of Julian of Norwich," Studia Mystica 8, no. 2 (Summer 1985): 4–14. Clement of Alexandria, in his second-century Pedagogus—some of which probably found its way into Medieval *florilegia*—may have given the analogy its most expansive and eloquent expression. Clement of Alexandria, Christ, the Educator of Little Ones, trans. S. P. Wood (Dunkirk, NY, 1954), 35–49. However, there is as yet no evidence that the Pedagogus was translated or even available in the original in quattrocento Florence. W. H. Wagner, "A Father's Fate: Attitudes Toward and Interpretations of Clement of Alexandria," The Journal of Religious History 6, no. 3 (June 1971): 211–15.

327. Aelred of Rievaulx, De Institutione Inclusarum, chap. 26, ed. C. Dumont (Paris, 1976), 104.

the heart of the Lord Jesus in the form of tireless expectancy and prompt forgiveness.”<sup>328</sup>

In her letters, as well as in her Dialogue, Saint Catherine of Siena wrote of “the breast of divine charity” and “of divine sweetness”:

We must do as a little child does who wants milk. It takes the breast of its mother, applies its mouth and by means of the flesh draws milk. We must do the same if we would be nourished. We must attach ourselves to the breast of Christ Crucified, which is the source of charity, and by means of that flesh we draw milk.<sup>329</sup>

Most relevant for the Bardi altarpiece in its Augustinian setting are Augustine’s frequent references to the theme of the nourishing Christ.<sup>330</sup> In a famous passage from the Confessions—quoted among the few direct citations from the saint’s writings in De Voragine’s Vita—Augustine perceives God as an infinitely superior light and “seems” to hear him say, “I am the food of the mature; grow then, and you will eat me. You will not change me into yourself like bodily food: you will be changed into me.”<sup>331</sup> Elsewhere Augustine exclaims, “When things go well with me, what am I but a child suckled on your milk and fed on you the food that perishes not?”<sup>332</sup> In another passage he mingles freely the trope of the “child” feeding on Christ’s milk and the imagery of visual illumination: “A sensual person is like a small child in Christ, in need of milk, until he is robust enough to eat solid food and his eyes have the strength to stand exposure to the

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328. Bernard of Clairvaux, Works vol. 2, Sermon 9, 57–8.

329. Catherine of Siena, Epistolario, 3rd. ed., ed. U. Meottini (Rome, 1979), letter 86, 1221.

330. In two articles, Robert J. O’Connell has discussed what he believed to be a pervasive concern with mother symbolism in Augustine’s imagining of God. O’Connell, “The God of Saint Augustine’s Imagination,” Thought 57 (March 1982): 38; “Isaiah’s Mothering God in St. Augustine’s Confessions,” Thought 58 (1983): 188–206.

331. Augustine, The Confessions, 173.

332. *Ibid.*, cit., IV, 1, 92.

sun.”<sup>333</sup> Augustine makes further use of the nursing trope in his commentaries on Psalm 30: “God ... is our mother because he cherishes us, nourishes us, feeds us with milk, and holds us in his arms” and “he who has promised us the food of heaven has nourished us here below with milk in his motherly mercy.”<sup>334</sup>

Augustine brought to *lactans* symbolism a sensitivity to the maternal character of the self-sacrificing Christian God, late classical familiarity with the *lactans* symbolism of nurturing and a Pauline vision of Christ as Wisdom. In a number of passages he explicitly identified the nursing mother who nourishes from her own flesh with the Christ who is Divine Wisdom, referring to “Our Mother the Wisdom of God.”<sup>335</sup> He invoked that metaphor, for instance, in his commentary on Psalm 30—“So too the Lord put on flesh and came to us, to make his Wisdom palatable for us as milk ...”<sup>336</sup>—and in his Confessions: “The food which, though I was not yet strong enough to eat it, he had had mingled with our flesh, so that your Wisdom through whom you created all things, might become for us the milk adapted to our infancy.”<sup>337</sup> In Tractate 98 of his commentaries on the Gospel of John, Augustine elaborated:

Solid food itself turns into milk whereby it can be suitable for infants to whom it comes through the flesh of a mother or a nurse; so also did Mother Wisdom herself, who, although on high she is the solid food of the angels, deigned, in a manner of speaking, to turn into milk for the little ones, when “the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.” But this very man Christ who, in his true flesh, true cross, true death, true Resurrection,

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333. Ibid., XIII, 18, 23, 358.

334. Augustine, Expositions of the Psalms, Exposition 2 of Psalm 30, 329.

335. Augustine, Questionum Evangeliorum, 2:26, P.L. vol. 35, col. 1330.

336. Augustine, Expositions of the Psalms, cit., Exposition 2 of Psalm 30, cit. p. 329.

337. Augustine, The Confessions, VII, 24, 178.

is called the pure milk of the little ones, when he is correctly apprehended by spiritual men, is found to be the Lord of the angels.<sup>338</sup>

This last passage makes clear that, for Augustine, the image of the nursing Christ, Wisdom and source of all wisdom, functioned as a signifier for the Incarnation, as expressed in John's formulation "The Word is made flesh and dwells among us" (1:14). The Bardi portrayal of nursing Wisdom as the infant Christ thus privileges the core fact of the Incarnation at the center of the nurturing and salutatory presence. It is hardly a coincidence that the evangelist John is stationed at Christ's side; for Augustine and the Augustinian Hermits of Santo Spirito, the full-breasted Child directly illustrates the words that John will inscribe in his open Gospel.

#### **G. The Bardi Madonna as *Madonna Lactans***

The centrality of the mothering Christ Child to the overlapping meanings of the painting should not allow us to ignore the crucial complementary role of the nursing Virgin. The imminence of Mary's nursing is brought insistently to the viewer's attention by its central location in the painting, the reaching arms of the Child, Mary's downward glance, and the visible contrast between her crimson *gamurra* and the white *camicia* revealed beneath.

The Virgin's garment is parted and she holds her nipple between her index and middle finger (fig. 44).<sup>339</sup> The same gesture reappears in Robert Campin's 1430 Virgin and Child before a Firescreen (fig. 48) and in a 1519 engraving by Dürer. In the latter

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338. Augustine, Tractates on the Gospel of John, Tractate 98, 213, 214.

339. According to Megan Holmes, the Virgin of the Bardi altarpiece "covers her breast with her hand, concealing all but the nipple, as a sign of her *pudore* and decorum" (179). Concealment here may indeed be a sign of *pudore*, or, without being itself a sign, have the desired effect of freeing the viewer from explicit erotic distraction, any confusion with the allegory of Charity, or both. As I will discuss below, the concealment of Mary's breast may also be significant as a gesture that parallels the partial revelation of Christ's own breasts.



image, the Virgin actually uses her hold on the nipple to insert it into the Child's mouth. The presence of this gesture in other works suggests that it would have been read by a fifteenth-century viewer as a sign that nursing is about to begin. The position of the Virgin's fingers will allow her to direct the nipple into the Child's mouth. If she looks down at the Child, it is because she expects him to turn towards her and begin nursing.<sup>340</sup> Botticelli's depiction of the Virgin's gesture encourages a naturalistic reading of the actions of Mother and Child as a nursing pair, which attaches a sense of the real, the *vécu*, to the Virgin's milk. In turn, the suggestion that real milk is about to flow is laden with attractive, even seductive, genre elements.<sup>341</sup> The beholder's attention directed to the act of nursing lingers expectantly.

As we noted, many works that juxtapose the image of the nursing Virgin and the open book draw iconographic parallels between the nursing Child on the one hand and Christ as Wisdom on the other. The image of the *sedes sapientiae*, in which a frontal, monumentalized Virgin holds the child on her lap as the seat or throne of wisdom, asserts a similar Pauline and Augustinian identification between the incarnate Christ and Divine Wisdom. As we noted, in medieval *sedes sapientiae*, the Child's appearance as a miniaturized adult dressed in a philosopher's toga and holding a scroll or a codex clearly identifies him as living Wisdom.<sup>342</sup> The assimilation of the figures of the *sedes*

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340. Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York: Random House, 1983), 194–200.

341. Certainly, the tales of miraculous lactations that abound in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance indicate that Mary's milk, present and real, was an object of desire.

342. One Florentine image of this type, a ca. 1280 dossal attributed to the Magdalene Master, *The Virgin and Child Enthroned with Saints Leonard and Peter*, is at the same time a *Madonna lactans*. Saint Leonard, depicted on the Virgin's right and identified by an inscription, is not shown with his usual attributes of prison keys, but with a book. Angelo Tartuferi, *La pittura a Firenze nel Duecento* (Florence: Bruschi, 1990).

*sapientiae* and the *Madonna lactans* occurs in a number of northern fifteenth-century paintings in which a monumental nursing Virgin is seated with ostentatious dignity on a throne decorated with lions, a reference to the typological wisdom of Solomon, whose throne featured lions.<sup>343</sup> Examples include Van der Weyden's Standing Madonna in Vienna, Campin's Virgin and Child before a Firescreen (fig. 48), in which an open book rests on a bench aligned with the Virgin's breast, and Van Eyck's Lucca Madonna (fig. 39). In that last panel, reminiscences of the *sedes sapientiae* are particularly prominent: The naked child sits straight-backed on his mother's lap; the four carved lions on the Virgin's throne are particularly evident and the erect figures of mother and child are both abstracted and magnified by geometric contours. Van Eyck's Virgin, like the Bardi Madonna, is presented, in Craig Harbison's words, with an "enormous and calculated dignity."<sup>344</sup>

The iconographic implication of this merging of Wisdom and nursing is further clarified by the late fourteenth-century Flemish motif of the nursing and writing Christ Child.<sup>345</sup> The best-known example of this image may be the Virgin and Child from the diptych that introduces the Brussels Hours of Jean de Berry. Both Millard Meiss and Panofsky described the nursing Virgin of the Brussels Hours as a *sedes sapientiae*,

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343. According to Guilbert of Nogent: "The Wisdom of God the Father is itself Solomon, who made for himself a throne of ivory, when he established his seat in the Virgin, superior to all in her chastity." *De Laude sanctae Mariae*, c.3, P.L., vol. 156, col. 541.

344. Harbison, Jan Van Eyck, 81.

345. Charles Parkhurst, "The Madonna of the Writing Christ Child," The Art Bulletin 23 (1941): 292; Jean Siquelbeck, "La Vierge à l'encrier et à l'enfant écrivain," Revue belge d'archéologie et d'histoire de l'art 19 (1950): 127.

because of the frontal pose of Mary and the monumentality of her throne (fig. 49).<sup>346</sup> As in a *sedes sapientiae*, the Christ Child, wrapped in his philosopher's toga, manifests himself as the Logos. However, he no longer merely holds a scroll or a book, but actually writes while attempting to nurse. Judging from those examples of the image in which Christ's inscription can be read, the writing consists usually of verses from the scriptures such as the "Ego sum lux mundi" from the Gospel of John (8:12). They are, to use Charles Parkhurst's description, "the words of Christ as teacher."<sup>347</sup> The Virgin in this image is more than the seat of wisdom: her nursing produces the Logos. Wisdom flows through Mother and Child to be expressed ultimately in the Word written by the hand of Christ, and Mary's milk is thus Christ himself, offered to all Christians.

Discussing the Pauline distinction between those who are fed meat and the "babes in Christ," Augustine specified, "You ought to know that it is the crucified Christ himself, with whom the Apostle says that he nourished the little ones as with milk."<sup>348</sup> Carolyn Bynum has shown that the Church accepted the physiological identity of Mary's milk and the body of Christ. Aristotelian theories of conception, adopted by the Church fathers, supported the view that Mary—the female—provided Christ's body with its physical substance.<sup>349</sup> In addition, medieval physiology presumed the equivalence of the

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346. Erwin Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971; 1st. ed. published 1953), 47; Millard Meiss, *French Painting*, 205.

347. Parkhurst, "Madonna of the Writing Christ Child," 304.

348. Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, 98, 208.

349. Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 98, 100, 212. On that basis, the archbishop of Florence, Antoninus (1389–1459), asserted that artists "paint things contrary to the faith," when, in Annunciation scenes, they represent "a formed little child, that is Jesus, being sent into the womb of the Virgin, as if his body were not derived from the substance of the Virgin." Antoninus, *Summa Theologica*, part 3, title 8, "On the Condition of Merchants and Craftsmen," chap. 4, sec. 2, quoted in Creighton B. Gilbert, *Italian Art 1400–1500: Sources and Documents* (Evanston, IL, 1980), 148.

mother's blood and her breast milk.<sup>350</sup> If the bodies of Mary and of Christ are made of the same substance, and if breast milk and blood are identical in nature, then the Virgin's milk and Christ's blood must be one and the same. Mary's milk may thus stand for her son's blood and her nursing may symbolize Christ's gift of that blood for the salvation of humanity. In other words, the nursing Virgin symbolically foreshadows Christ's sacrifice and, by the same token, the image of the *Madonna lactans* stands as a signifier, not only of the Incarnation, but of that sacrifice as it is reenacted in the sacrament of the Eucharist.

Campin's Virgin and Child before a Firescreen (fig. 48) illustrates in the most straightforward way the equation of the Logos, Christ's blood and Mary's milk. Not only is Mary's bench decorated with lions, but her breast is aligned with the open Bible to her left and the nipple of that breast is precisely aligned with the lip of the chalice on the table to her right. In Filippo Lippi's Medici Novitiate altarpiece (fig. 28), the spectator himself is forcibly involved in this equation of Mary's milk and Christ's blood, offered to humanity. The Christ Child, standing on his mother's lap and looking out towards us, presses his mother's breast to express the milk for the viewer. Seated to the Virgin's left, Saint Cosmas looks down at the Child's uncovered penis, site of the Circumcision and the first shedding of Christ's blood, which foreshadows the gift of redeeming blood shed at the Crucifixion.<sup>351</sup>

The Bardi altarpiece as well is rich in Eucharistic imagery. The familiar message delivered by John the Baptist—"Behold the Lamb of God who taketh away the sins of the world"—places the Christ Child immediately in a Eucharistic context. The olives and

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350. Bynum, Fragmentation and Redemption, 214, 79–80; Otto Semmelroth, Mary, Archetype of the Church, trans. Maria von Eros and John Devlin (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), 44; Katzenellenbogen, Sculptural Programs, 59–60.

351. Ruda, "1434 Building Programme," 168.

lemons of the painting's setting as well as the Virgin's lactating nipple frame the plump and vital body of Christ and identify it as the food of our soul. At the same time, the identification of the nursing body of Mary with that of Christ and the Eucharistic implications of that identification are laid out pictorially along a vertical axis that runs down the center of the painting (fig. 44). The Child on Mary's lap is formed from her body, from the substance of her blood and milk. That same body, emaciated and bleeding, reappears on the tablet of Christ crucified at the foot of the painting's central axis. The tablet is itself propped up against the lidded vessel placed immediately above it. That vessel resembles a pyxis, the container used during the Mass to contain the wafers for Communion. The Crucifixion tablet thus serves to label the vessel: it is a symbol of the body of Mary as the container of the nourishing body of Christ. At the center of this central axis, Botticelli offers us an unobstructed view of the stretch of pleated *gamurra* that covers the Virgin's stomach. The delicate play of light over the red cloth conveys the impression of a slightly rounded surface—the Virgin's womb. It is at the center of that slight but vital protuberance that Botticelli has situated the vanishing point of his altarpiece. The invisible orthogonals of the painting converge and the viewer's eye is led to Mary's womb, where Divine Wisdom was planted and grew and the flesh of Mary became the flesh of Christ. At the same time, the gaze of the Christ Child, food of the Christian soul, also draws the observer as if to the psychological, rather than geometric, heart of the painting.

#### **H. The Bardi Madonna as Ecclesia**

The Eucharistic connotations of the Bardi Madonna should alert us to her true nature within the network of significances posited by the painting: distinctively linear and

stately, the Virgin assumes here her role as Ecclesia. As the fount of God's Wisdom, the *Madonna lactans* merged early with the figure of *Ecclesia lactans*, whose relationships with God and with humanity are parallel. A reference by Saint Augustine to "the milk of the Sacraments" connected the trope of *sapientia lactans* to the Church and its nurturing role.<sup>352</sup> Marcus Aurelius Cassiodorus (ca. 485–580), discussing verses 7–8 of chapter 7 of the Song of Songs—"Thy stature is like to a palm tree and thy breasts to clusters of grapes"—gave the analogy a different application: "The Breasts of the Church ... are the holy teachers who, with the milk of simple doctrine nourished those men reborn in Christ."<sup>353</sup> This view was a medieval commonplace. By the time Honorius of Autun employed the metaphor of *Ecclesia lactans* in the twelfth century, its workings had become elaborate. "The breasts of Ecclesia are the two testaments, from which the preachers imbibe the milk of mystic knowledge, which preachers are called breasts, because they furnish the milk of doctrine to the uneducated."<sup>354</sup>

The natural merging of *sapientia* or *philosophia lactans* with the figure of the Church seen as Mater Ecclesia, the nurturing mother of the faithful, resulted in the medieval image of Ecclesia nursing Moses and Paul, representatives of the Old and New Testaments, respectively.<sup>355</sup> What is clear is that both pairs of breasts retain their function as purveyors of wisdom. Early in the fourteenth century, Giovanni Pisano's

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352. Schiller, *Ikonographie der christlichen Kunst*, 4:87 n. 113.

353. Marcus Aurelius Cassiodorus, *P. L.*, vol. 70, col. 1097. Cassiodorus's gloss of Song of Songs 7:7–8 alludes specifically to Paul's reference in 1 Cor. 3:1–2 to the teaching of the infant soul with milk.

354. *P. L.* vol. 145, col. 1280, "How excellently and healthfully we were nourished by Mother Church; else what is the worth of that 'milk' which saint Paul declared he gave as drink to the little ones"; Augustine, "The Magnitude of the Soul," in *Writings of Saint Augustine*, vol. 2 (New York, 1947), 33, 76, 143.

355. Schiller, *Ikonographie der christlichen Kunst*, 4:87, fig. 211.

Ecclesia Lactans carved for a pulpit in the Cathedral of Pisa perpetuates the iconographic traditions of *sapientia lactans*. Ecclesia stands nursing two frail children above female representations of the three theological Virtues (fig. 50). Relief carvings of the seven Liberal Arts, the specifically human manifestations of *sapientia*, are set in niches nearby. In his analysis of Gerard David's several different versions of his Rest on the Flight to Egypt, James E. Mundy has shown that the nourishing Virgin, whether she feeds the Christ Child sacramental grapes or the milk of her own breasts, stands for the Church in its nurturing and teaching role.<sup>356</sup> Similarly, Frederick Hartt interprets the *Virgo lactans* in Michelangelo's Medici Chapel as a representation of Ecclesia offering sustenance to the Medici.<sup>357</sup>

If *sapientia lactans* was *Ecclesia lactans*, Ecclesia was also the Virgin, and most certainly the nursing Virgin. The Church fathers, Augustine in particular, formulated early the equation of the Church and the Virgin.<sup>358</sup> Like the Church, Mary is the instrument by which the Logos accomplishes the salvation of mankind. Like the Church, she exists in a state of radical union with Christ. In the liturgy and in devotional writing, the character of this union is expressed through either the bridal language of the Canticum or the metaphor of corporeal integrity: Mary and the Church are the body of which Christ is the head. In the Middle Ages the association of Mary and the Church was very widely disseminated, primarily by Honorius of Autun. "Everything that is said of the Church,"

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356. James E. Mundy, "Gerard David's Rest on the Flight to Egypt: Further Additions to Grape Symbolism," Simiolus, 12, no. 4 (1981–82): 211–22.

357. Frederick Hartt, "The Meaning of Michelangelo's Medici Chapel," in Essays in Honor of Georg Swarzenski, ed. Oswald Goetz (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1951), 148–50.

358. Semmelroth, Mary, Archetype of the Church, 44; Katzenellenbogen, Sculptural Programs, 59–60.

Honorius asserted in his commentary on the Canticle, “can also be understood as being said of the Virgin herself, the bride and mother of the Bridegroom.”<sup>359</sup>

The distinctive aspects of the Bardi Madonna’s beauty and posture—her gravity, remoteness and rigorous verticality—all evoke her assimilation to Ecclesia. The long cloak falling from her shoulders down over her knees imposes on her body a unified triangular shape that subtly dehumanizes it by concealing its articulation. Her frontal position gives to her lower body, which bears the Christ Child, the shelf-like appearance of an altar.<sup>360</sup> In this case, the symbolism of the altar associates Mary not only with the sacrament of the Eucharist but also with the Church through which the Eucharist is offered and, additionally, with the altar in the Church that is portrayed by the altarpiece’s garden setting.

Rabanus Maurus, in the ninth century, had already identified the garden mentioned in verse 42 of Ecclesiasticus 24 with Ecclesia: “Moreover, Wisdom’s garden of plants is the Church, which truth itself forever waters and inebriates with her doctrine, so that she brings forth daily her spiritual fruit.”<sup>361</sup> The Bardi garden, fashioned out of the vegetation of Ecclesiasticus, is thus itself a portrayal of Ecclesia. Indeed, the shallow spatial field of the painting, the effect of enclosure created by the height of the niches and the elaborately designed and carved marble of the balustrade, all convey the impression of a garden that is also an interior. The reference to a church interior is heightened by the twin towers of vases, flowers and branches placed to either side of the Madonna. Like the

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359. *P. L.*, vol. 172, col. 494.

360. The *ara coeli* or altar of heaven is one of the Virgin’s epithets. Lane, *Altar and the Altarpiece*, 14–23.

361. Rabanus Maurus, *P. L.*, 109, col. 944.



bulbous finials that decorate Mary's throne in Filippo Lippi's Barbadori altarpiece (fig. 17), they resemble the candlesticks that decorate an altar.<sup>362</sup>

As we saw, through a variety of devices, Botticelli makes it clear to his beholder that the shallow space of his painting is continuous with the space of the Bardi chapel at Santo Spirito and that the painting's backdrop conforms to the back of the chapel itself. The garden of the altarpiece is thus located in the chapel of the Bardi in Santo Spirito, and is thus a part of the church of Santo Spirito. At the same time, as I noted earlier, the triptych frame of the trecento, which recalls Gothic church architecture, is reproduced within the Bardi altarpiece as a triad of niches that functions architecturally to house the saints and the Madonna. Clearly, the arches of the Bardi garden retain the reference to a church interior. Mid-quattrocento images of the Madonna and saints in an exterior setting often set the figures against a background wall.<sup>363</sup> Later, as in Fra Angelico's 1450–52 Bosco ai Frati altarpiece or Filippo Lippi's Medici Novitiate altarpiece, the wall was carved out into shallow niches (fig. 28). In Botticelli's composition, niches of plaited branches carve out the wall of vegetation, just as Brunelleschi scooped out the walls of Santo Spirito into a suite of shallow, semicircular chapels. In both cases, instead of a boundary wall that closes us off and conceals what lies beyond, we receive the impression of a series of smaller spaces opened toward us. It seems clear that Botticelli wished to allude to the new church of Santo Spirito and its contiguous shallow chapels. The Bardi Madonna, her evergreen, ever-fruitful garden, and the Church of Santo Spirito

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362. Shearman, *Only Connect*, 71.

363. As is the case of the Corbinelli *sacre conversazione* in the left transept of Santo Spirito.

itself are Ecclesia, the Church through which we receive our nourishment, the Divine Wisdom that is Christ.

Botticelli's use in the altarpiece of stratagems of concealment and exposure is explained by the complementary roles of Mary and her son. Mary-Ecclesia exposes her nipple and conceals her breast, in order to manifest the specifics of her role. She is a conduit; it is through her that the milk of Christ's breasts will flow. The Child, his eyes intent on the viewer, half-conceals his own full breasts and reaches up his plump arms towards the Virgin's exposed nipple. His gesture preserves the decorum of the artist's naturalistic narrative—a child interrupted while reaching for his mother's breast—by minimizing the visible presence of his full breasts. It also demands to be read as a statement of admonition and guidance: the mundane viewer, standing in the church of Santo Spirito in Florence, may not drink yet from Christ himself; Wisdom must be sought from the breast of Ecclesia.

Why would Giovanni de Bardi have commissioned a work laden with scriptural references, and one whose assertions about Christ as Wisdom, the Eucharist and the Church pivot on elaborately interconnected figural tropes—nursing as teaching, Christ as mother? We know that Bardi's chapel was one of the first to be purchased in the newly constructed church of Santo Spirito and that its location against the rear wall of the apse was a prominent one. Bardi sought out for the commission both the well-connected architect and sculptor Giuliano da Sangallo, who designed the altarpiece frame, and Botticelli, who had recently returned from Rome where he had worked on the decoration of the Sistine Chapel. Clearly, Bardi's commission was designed to impress. The highly ornate setting, fantastically conceived, naturalistically represented and meticulously

finished, has the character of a tour de force. In turn, the painting's elegant and concise integration of references to the Old Testament persona of Wisdom and to the trope of nursing as both the mothering of Christ and the teaching of Ecclesia, as well as its carefully synchronized display of Eucharistic symbolism, constitutes a sophisticated iconographic complement to the painting's formal bravura. The resulting work is not only aesthetically but also intellectually and spiritually ornate, lavish, and original.

The Augustinian friars would certainly have favored the presence of such a brilliant and elegant ornament to the bare fabric of their new church. There is good reason to believe, moreover, that they promoted—and to some degree invented—Botticelli's iconography. As a chapter of a teaching order and a foundation that housed a prestigious *studium*, they could only favor an altarpiece whose subject was Christ as teacher. It is hardly surprising that a few years later, another teaching order, the Dominicans, decorated the high altar of their church, Santa Maria Novella, with an altarpiece on the same theme with a similar iconography, Ghirlandaio's Madonna and Child with Saints Dominic, Michael, John the Baptist and John the Evangelist (fig. 43). The melding of text and image within the altarpiece and the recondite character of the iconography must have been doubly pleasing to the friars; the panel itself was a teacher, cultivating in its viewer the gifts of scriptural exegesis, practiced and taught by their father Augustine.

The striking and seductive appeal of the altarpiece serves its rhetorical purpose; that is, its ability to compel and maintain the attention of the viewer. In so doing, the painting exhibits an awareness—on the part of the artist and of the Hermits of Santo Spirito—of the full range of responses that could be evoked in the painting's beholder

and of the possibility of progression from the sensual through the aesthetic and the intellectual to the spiritual. That progression—spiritual growth through interpretation—is itself Augustinian. Repeatedly, Augustine noted that the obscurity of any material enhances the task of exegesis. “Our canonical authors,” he asserted, “... have spoken with a helpful and healthy obscurity in order to exercise and somehow refine their readers’ minds or to overcome the reluctance and whet the enthusiasm of those seeking to learn, or even in order to cloud the minds of the wicked.”<sup>364</sup> Addressing the prophets’ use of figurative language, he concluded, “The more thoroughly indeed they seem to be wrapped up under metaphorical expressions, the sweeter they taste when they are finally unpacked.”<sup>365</sup>

The viewer who approaches the Bardi altarpiece, struck by the powerful immediacy of the two Saints John and beguiled by the saturated sensuousness of the garden setting, may linger to read the scriptural references attached to the plants. The meaning of the garden, it turns out, is Wisdom, the Christ Child on the *sedes sapientiae*, whose flesh is consumed on the altar below. The Child looks out at the viewer, his mouth half-open. Beneath the concealing arm his breasts are visible, engorged with milk. It is he who speaks the words of Ecclesiasticus 24:29: “Come to me, all ye who are desirous of me and fill yourselves with my fruit ... Whoever feeds on me will yet hunger for more; whoever drinks from me will yet thirst for more.” That verse was discussed by Augustine in the last book of the De Trinitate. The Christian’s search for God, he asserted, was unending yet perpetually fruitful: “They eat and drink because they find, and because

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364. Augustine, Teaching Christianity IV 7, 15, 209.

365. Ibid., 111; see also 33, 106.

they are hungry and thirsty they still go on seeking. Faith seeks, understanding finds...

And again, understanding still goes on seeking the one it has found ...”<sup>366</sup> Seductive and multilayered, the Bardi altarpiece celebrates Divine Wisdom and instructs in human wisdom—the perpetual search for and finding of Christ.

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366. Augustine, De Trinitate, XV, 2, 395, 24.

### III. “The Unity of the Spirit in the Bond of Peace”:

#### Piero di Cosimo’s Visitation with Saints Nicholas of Bari and Anthony Abbot

If the Bardi altarpiece is an unusual *sacra conversazione*, Piero di Cosimo’s Visitation with Saints Nicholas of Bari and Anthony Abbot (fig. 4), is a highly unusual narrative composition that spoke to its beholders about the unity and peace of the Church, and, within that context, of the value of self-examination and self-correction, the true practice of the Christian life and God’s “visitation” of the soul. By the time of the commission Piero di Cosimo, a painter admired in Florence for his inventiveness, his *fantasia*, his fine coloristic sense and his highly defined, tactile, even earthy naturalism, was a confident painter of altarpieces with a growing interest in arresting, unusual compositions.<sup>367</sup> While the date of the Visitation’s execution is not certain, it was certainly commissioned many years after Botticelli’s work was completed. While Piero’s panel shares with the Bardi altarpiece the foreground device of two saints who project out into the viewer’s space, the overall composition with its deeply recessed and detailed landscape could not be more different.

The Bardi altarpiece encouraged the beholder to construct the relationship between Divine Wisdom, described and imaged as a plant growing in Zion, with the narrative of Christ’s Incarnation and sacrifice, portrayed in the image of the nursing Christ who is himself the nurse of mankind. The Visitation, in turn, promotes the viewer’s adumbration of the biblical event of the Visitation. That event is manifested through the redemptive presence unfolding through its background landscape, the

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367. Geronimus, Piero di Cosimo, 3, 198, 203.

illuminating role of the Holy Spirit, the opening verses of the book of Wisdom, read in the foreground by Saint Nicholas of Bari, and the transition from the era of Christ's absence to the era of his potential presence, a transition effected and symbolized by the formal handclasp of Mary and Elizabeth.

Commentators on the painting have not concerned themselves with the relationship between the Wisdom language of Saint Nicholas's book and the Visitation as it is depicted in the painting. The exception is Capretti, who argued that the altarpiece's iconography must be influenced by the thinking of Saint Augustine. She privileged *sapientia*, a value dear to Augustine, as the unifying notion that permeates the image, and associated it broadly with the figures of Mary and Elizabeth.<sup>368</sup> Capretti noted, as well, although without elaboration, Augustine's perception of the Visitation as a sign of the transition between the Old and the New Testaments.<sup>369</sup> Although I build upon Capretti's Augustinian outlook on the painting, I disagree with her assertion that Piero's pre-Trentine work must be *facilmente leggibile*.<sup>370</sup> While the altarpiece speaks to a range of audiences, in its compositional complexity, wealth of unexpected detail and multilayered use of symbol and allegory, it addresses most particularly the learned and sophisticated Augustinian Hermits of Santo Spirito. For the friars, the reading required by the panel, probing, analytical and imaginative, may well have encapsulated the monastic experience

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368. Capretti, "La pinacoteca sacra," 282–83; Capretti, "Antefatti della Controriforma," 46, 49.

369. Augustine, *Sermons*, v, 273–340, cited in Capretti, "Antefatti della Controriforma," 49. Capretti may have chosen not to discuss Augustine's linkage of the Visitation with the union of the Testaments because she did not perceive a connection between the Visitation as a marker of Christian history and the prominent Wisdom inscription in Saint Nicholas's book.

370. Capretti, "Antefatti della Controriforma," 46.

of prayerful living—the attentive opening of the unblemished soul to God—whose very reward, the visit of the Holy Spirit, was depicted in Piero’s altarpiece.

### **A. The Altarpiece: Commission and Subject Matter**

The painting, now located at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, was executed for the memorial chapel of Neri di Gino Capponi located in the upper right-hand transept of Santo Spirito and thus in a prominent position near the high altar (14, fig. 4).

The frame, executed by Clemente del Tasso, is lost; however, a preparatory sketch by the painter’s hand includes three of the Visitation figures as well a frame design (fig. 51).

The sketch tells us that the frame may have been designed by Piero di Cosimo and that it was richly carved with profuse scrolls and vegetation in the manner of the Nerli altarpiece frame, which still survives in situ in a neighboring chapel.<sup>371</sup> The patrons of the Capponi chapel were a large clan of extremely successful businessmen long settled in the *quartiere* of Santo Spirito and highly active in military affairs and influential in Florentine politics.<sup>372</sup> They patronized at least one chapel in the old church and were

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371. I argued in the previous chapter (supra., 69-70 ) that an ornamental frame with painted vegetation motifs would have been compatible with the profuse ornament and vegetation motifs of Botticelli’s Bardi panel. Together, frame and painting would have impressed the viewer as a relatively homogeneous totality. By the time the Capponi altarpiece was commissioned, it seems likely that a richly ornamented frame had become a requirement of the Santo Spirito *opera* in its effort to maintain the uniform appearance of the chapels. Yet, in the case of Piero’s panel, such a frame would have contrasted with the painting’s ample rhythms, large blocks of color—and, in the prominent middle ground, a clear absence of ornament. The dark vertical panels behind the foreground saints in Piero’s painting constitute a plain frame-within-the-painting, which fulfills several functions, among them that of easing the transition between the rhythms of the frame and those of the panel itself.

372. Francis William Kent, Household and Lineage in Renaissance Florence: The Life of the Capponi, Ginori and Rucellai (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977), 264. Between 1287 and 1531, the family contributed to the city ten *gonfaloniere de giustizia* and fifty six *priori*. Neri di Gino distinguished himself at the battle of Anghiari in 1440. Geronimus, Piero di Cosimo, 200.



involved in the reconstruction of Santo Spirito from its inception.<sup>373</sup> In 1459, Gino di Neri Capponi (1423–87), pursuant to his father’s 1450 will, founded his chapel in the old church and dedicated it to Saint Nicholas of Bari, described by his relative Cappone Capponi as “the protector of our house.”<sup>374</sup> Already in 1458, Bernardo Rossellino had carved for the chapel a marble sarcophagus bearing Neri di Gino’s profile portrait. As noted above, in 1488, the family had requested of the opera that it break down a portion of the chapel wall and replace it with a bronze grate so that Neri’s sarcophagus could be seen.<sup>375</sup>

Gino’s son, Piero di Gino (1446–96), was widely admired as a military field commander, ambassador and, during the turmoil of the 1490s, a crucial early opponent of Piero de’ Medici and a participant in the new government. After the French king Charles VIII’s entry into Florence in 1494, Piero di Gino’s steely rejection of the king’s demands that the Medici be restored to power may have been decisive in persuading the French to come to terms with the Florentine republic.<sup>376</sup> Piero may have initiated the commission of the altarpiece, since the Capponi account book shows his entry, dated October 1489,

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373. Kent (Household and Lineage, 259–60) asserts on the basis of several sources that throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries “most Capponi of all branches ... were buried in the major church of Santo Spirito. Corpses were transported some distance to be reunited with other Capponi dead.” The Capponi di Gino had at least one chapel in the old Santo Spirito, dedicated to Saint Nicholas of Bari and frescoed by Barna. Quinterio, “Il complesso di Santo Spirito,” 42 n. 11. Moreover, Neri di Gino was included among the six *operai* elected in 1436 by the neighborhood and the *frati del convento* to initiate the construction of the new church. Botto, “L’edificazione,” 493. As Gonfaloniere de Giustizia, in 1444, he was instrumental in securing financial contributions from the city for the building project. Quinterio, “Il complesso di Santo Spirito,” 45. By the early sixteenth century, the Capponi clan boasted four chapels in the new church, all in the right transept. Kent, Household and Lineage, 264.

374. Noted by Cappone Capponi in 1461 in his diary. Kent, Household and Lineage, 264.

375. Kent, Household and Lineage, 264–66. Among other expenses incurred for the purchase and furnishing of the chapel, Gino paid, in 1481, for the installation of “a plain glass window.” Stephanie Jane Craven, “Three Dates for Piero di Cosimo,” Burlington Magazine 118, no. 870 (September 1975): 572..

376. Weinstein, Savonarola and Florence, 131, 136–137.

for payment for the altarpiece's frame. Because that frame was probably carved before the altarpiece was painted -- as in the case of the Bardi altarpiece-- and based on a *terminus post quem* of 1489, the work has been dated to ca. 1490.<sup>377</sup> Although that date has been widely accepted,<sup>378</sup> the panel may, in fact, have been painted --or at least finished-- considerably later. A wealthy and childless member of the Capponi *consorteria*, Mico d'Uguccione,<sup>379</sup> referred in his will of 1497 to the family chapel of Saint Nicholas and provided sums to "finish or paint the altarpiece of that chapel."<sup>380</sup> It is possible that, following the completion of the frame, the completion of the panel was considerably delayed. Such a delay would help explain the rather confusing formulation used in Mico d'Uguccione's will; if the frame already existed, and the subject matter of the painting had been agreed upon, to finish the altarpiece would be, in effect, to paint it.<sup>381</sup>

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377. Craven, "Three Dates," 572. The earlier dating of the Visitation, on stylistic grounds, had been in the late 1480s.

378. Saron Fermor, Piero di Cosimo: Fiction, Invention and Fantasia (London: Reaktion Books, 1993), caption to fig. 87; Geronimus, Piero di Cosimo, 198.

379. Kent mentions Mico d'Uguccione, as well as Gino di Neri, Piero di Gino and a few others, as significant members of "brilliant and powerful generations" of Capponi (Kent, Household and Lineage, 42). He was, along with Gino di Neri, among the "influential men of each lineage" to sign the legal document breaking the Capponi's ties of parentage with the Vettori in 1452 (Ibid., 241, n.47).

380. "Per ragione di legato et per rimedio della anima sua lasciò et legò alla cappella di San Niccolò de' Chapponi... tucto quello et quanto si riceverebbe della parte tachate al ditto Micho d'un certo credito... la quale certa somma... volle doversi spendere et chomandò in fnire overo dipignere la tavola dello altare della cappella." Conventi Soppressi, San Piero a Monticelli, 163 (34), cited in Kent, Household and Lineage, 265. Mico d'Uguccione lived another seven years after signing his 1497 will; it is quite possible of course, that he or others disbursed the necessary sums for the altarpiece's completion before his death.

381. It may be objected that Mico could have been referring to a different chapel within Santo Spirito. As we mentioned briefly above (69-70 and accompanying notes), the Capponi owned, in the late fifteenth century, two right transept chapels at Santo Spirito, in addition to the one purchased by Neri di Gino Capponi (14). One (9) acquired by Guglielmo di Niccolò of the Altopascio Capponi branch in the 1490s and dedicated to Santa Monica (Thomas, "Neri di Bicci," 25). The other (8), acquired by Niccolò di Giovanni of the San Frediano branch and dedicated to Saint Augustine, was furnished, probably, with Zanobi Machiavelli's polyptych (Kent, Household and Lineage, 105 and n. 187, Thomas, Art and Piety,

Piero's painting foregrounds its reference to the Capponi in the important figure of Saint Nicholas, the family's patron saint. In other aspects, however, it appears to reflect the interests of the Santo Spirito friars in the worship of Mary and the Holy Spirit, dedicatees of the church, in the thought of Augustine and in a monastic praxis sustained by meditation and critical introspection.<sup>382</sup> The Visitation, the meeting of Mary and Elizabeth that followed Elizabeth's miraculous conception of Saint John the Baptist and Gabriel's Annunciation to Mary, was the subject of 1:39–45 of the Gospel of Luke:

And Mary rising up in those days, went into the hill country with haste into a city of Juda. And she entered into the house of Zachary and saluted Elizabeth. And it came to pass that when Elizabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the infant leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Ghost. And she cried out with a loud voice and said: Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb. And whence is this to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold as soon as the voice of thy salutation sounded in my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed art thou that hast believed, because those things shall be accomplished that were spoken to thee by the Lord.

Piero's representation conforms to the scriptural language, which establishes Elizabeth as the protagonist of the Visitation scene proper, Mary and Elizabeth's initial meeting.

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56). Mico d'Uguccione was the cousin of Niccolò di Giovanni. If his will had referred to the Altopascio branch chapel dedicated to Saint Augustine, he would not have described it as "the chapel of Saint Nicholas of the Capponi." Indeed, Kent argues that, despite the presence of chapels belonging to different Capponi "houses", Neri di Gino's chapel functioned as the chapel of the *consorteria* as a whole. In 1469, Gino di Neri himself noted that he still owed "seventy florins for the chapel of the house and of the *consorteria*." (Kent, *Household and Lineage* 264). Piero di Giovanni, the scion of yet another Capponi branch, asked to be buried in "the tomb of the chapel of the *consorteria* of the Capponi" (Kent, *Household and Lineage*, 265). In the sixteenth century, a descendant of Mico d'Uguccione will refer to "the glass window made in Santo Spirito for the common chapel of the Capponi" (Ibid.). Thus, despite the presence of other Capponi chapels at Santo Spirito, it seems likely that the reference in Mico's 1497 will to "the chapel of Saint Nicholas of the Capponi" applies to the chapel purchased by Neri di Gino and eventually decorated with the Visitation

382. This, together with the plain glass window purchased for the chapel and the possible delay in the execution of the altarpiece, suggests a certain lack of involvement on the part of the Capponi in the decoration of their chapel. They may have thought of it primarily as a familial burial site. Once the *opera* had agreed to break down the chapel wall to reveal the sarcophagus of Neri di Gino, and provided that their patron saint was included in the altarpiece, they were content to let the friars decide on the details of the decoration.

Before Mary's mantled form, the aged Elizabeth initiates the motion of genuflecting, her body turned in three-quarter view, her hand raised and lips parted to speak the verses attributed to her by the Gospels. Images of this encounter, similarly centered on the meeting of Mary and Elizabeth, would have been familiar to fifteenth-century viewers from illuminated Books of Hours in which the Visitation, consistently included in the Little Hours of the Virgin, occupies the hour of Lauds.<sup>383</sup> Since the sixth century, large-scale depictions of the Visitation appear consistently in narrative cycles illustrating the lives of the Virgin or of Saint John the Baptist. The Visitation is included, for instance, in Giotto's cycle of the Life of the Virgin at the Scrovegni chapel in Padua and Andrea Pisano's cycle of the Life of Saint John the Baptist on the south doors of the Baptistery of Florence. Scholars have noted that the Santo Spirito Visitation is an unusual subject for an independent altarpiece.<sup>384</sup> Urban VI's extension of the Feast of the Visitation, adopted by the Franciscans in 1263, to the entire Church on April 6, 1389, does not appear to have altered the exclusive use of large-scale Visitations as components of the Baptist's or, more frequently, the Virgin's narrative cycles. At the time of Piero's commission, for instance, Ghirlandaio would have been completing his fresco cycle illustrating the life of

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383. In response to Elizabeth's greeting, Mary sings the hymn in praise of the Lord known as the Magnificat (Luke 1:46–5), which is included in the liturgy of the Feast of the Visitation. The Magnificat is sometimes reflected in the liturgy for Lauds in the Hours of the Virgin, ordinarily illustrated by a Visitation image. The liturgy of Lauds often includes Ps. 69:5: "Let all that seek thee rejoice and be glad in thee; and let such as love thy salvation say always: The Lord be magnified." However, as in Piero's altarpiece, pictorial representations of the Visitation, whether illuminated miniatures or large-scale images, take as their subject Mary and Elizabeth's initial encounter rather than Mary's delivery of the Magnificat.

384. Fermor, Piero di Cosimo, 123; Lynne Ellen Johnson, "The Religious Paintings of Piero di Cosimo" (PhD diss., University of Maryland, 1992), 123; Geronimus, Piero di Cosimo, 202.

the Virgin for the Tornabuoni chapel at Santa Maria Novella, including a Visitation set in a dramatically composed and lively landscape.<sup>385</sup>

Despite the apparent novelty of the subject matter's independent treatment here, it is very likely that neither the artist nor his Augustinian patrons perceived the Capponi Visitation as an independent image dissociated from the cycle of the life of the Virgin. Within the panel itself, background vignettes representing the Annunciation, the Nativity and the Massacre of the Innocents frame the foreground Visitation within its programmatic and narrative context. Moreover, as I discussed earlier,<sup>386</sup> over the next decade, the area around the Santo Spirito high altar and friar's choir would be furnished with four more narrative altarpieces that depict episodes of the life of the Virgin: a mid-1490s Annunciation by Pietro del Donzello (fig.18), a 1509 Nativity by Donzello's workshop, the ca. 1495 Journey to Calvary (fig. 14) by Biagio d'Antonio and the 1503–05 Pietà by Raffaellino del Garbo for the Nasi chapel (fig. 26), adjacent to the Capponi family chapel. Thus, the Visitation, while not embedded in a uniform, tightly knit and continuous program, is nonetheless inscribed within two cycles of the life of the Virgin, the one depicted within the panel itself, the other distributed among the chapels of the northern section of the church. The existence of a programmatic context for Piero's Visitation—the life of the Virgin rather than that of John the Baptist—allows us to specify that the image is not primarily concerned with the response of John the Baptist *in utero* to the presence of Christ. Instead, Elizabeth's response to Mary as the carrier of Christ is the central matter of the image.

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385. Johnson, "Religious Paintings," 49; Goffen, Piety and Patronage, 6.

386. Supra chap. 1, 55–56.

## B. Composition

Despite an apparent conventionality and unity, Piero's composition for the Visitation is complex and speaks not only about its ostensible subject, the Visitation of Mary and Elizabeth, but also about the act of beholding itself, as undertaken by a variety of audiences. The panel's highly rhetorical structure plays upon levels and aspects of the real and draws the viewer into the painting as both space and argument, challenging the monastic viewer, in particular, to a careful and detailed reading. In the immediate foreground, the two saints, Nicholas of Bari and Anthony Abbot, are seated on the ground, the one reading, the other writing. Behind them stand the monumental forms of Mary and Elizabeth, their right hands joined, silhouetted against a brilliant sky. Beyond, a far-reaching landscape opens up, the middle ground flanked to either side by the tall urban facades that shelter diminutive Gospel scenes—a Nativity with shepherds on the left, to the right a Murder of the Innocents, backed by a cityscape, which we may assume to be Jerusalem. Behind the Nativity, a path leads back past a flourishing green tree and up through a rocky escarpment. On the right, a similar tree, in this case almost bare of leaves, leads the eye to a distant hill, cliff and mountain and an approaching rain cloud. In the far distance, at the center of the composition we note the silver horizon line of the sea.

At first glance, certain salient features of the composition—the broad landscape vista, the cityscape, the palazzo façades, the two old men in the foreground—would have struck a fifteenth-century viewer as the familiar landmarks of a Visitation image, all of them recognizable from church fresco cycles and Books of Hours. The Visitation is ordinarily framed by a landscape that conveys a sense of the length and arduousness of Mary's journey. A cityscape, representing Jerusalem from which Mary is assumed to

have traveled, is often visible in the distance. At the same time, because Luke indicated that Mary and Elizabeth met within Elizabeth's house, the facade of Elizabeth's house is included, as, for instance, in Giotto's Visitation in the Scrovegni chapel (fig. 52). In addition to the central figures, Mary and Elizabeth, Mary's husband Joseph or Elizabeth's husband Zachariah are familiar figures in Visitation images.<sup>387</sup> Sometimes both aged husbands are present, as in the image that illustrates the episode of the Visitation in the fourteenth-century Meditations of the Life of Christ (fig. 53). Fittingly, the author goes on to describe both husbands as "these magnificent old men ..."<sup>388</sup>

Insofar as Piero's Visitation includes features that resemble these conventional cues, it would advertise itself to a casual fifteenth-century observer as a Visitation image and, as such, well able to integrate into a broader program of the life of Mary, such as the one set up in the chapels of Santo Spirito. However, the beholder who studied the painting more closely would have found many of these cues subverted to other uses. While the landscape vista may still speak of Mary's journey, the palazzo facades are disconnected from the figures of Mary and Elizabeth. The right-hand facade, instead of functioning as pictorial shorthand for Elizabeth's house, serves as a backdrop for a depiction of the Massacre of the Innocents. The cityscape, ordinarily associated with Mary, is placed on the same side of the painting as the figure of Elizabeth and merged with the palazzo facade behind her. The two old men in the foreground are not Zachariah and Joseph, but the early Christian saints Nicholas and Anthony. In fact, seated with their

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387. Examples include the Visitation illuminations in the fifteenth-century Rohan Hours, which includes Zachariah (fig. 63), and the mid-fifteenth-century English Berkeley Hours, which has Joseph follow Mary, cane in hand (fig. 74).

388. Isa Ragusa and Rosalie B. Green, eds., Meditations on the Life of Christ (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), 22–23.

backs turned to Elizabeth and Mary, the two saints appear spatially and psychologically disconnected from the Visitation taking place before our eyes.

As a result, the Visitation image that would have been familiar to most fifteenth-century Florentines and that was inscribed within their memory of the life of the Virgin has been, to some extent at least, deconstructed. This partial deconstruction retains the pictorial frame of the Visitation narrative—landscape, cityscape, private dwellings—while isolating the principal protagonists within it, so that they are free from husbands and houses, all the clinging facticity of the historical Visitation. One striking manifestation of this freedom is the absence of any apparent pregnancy in either Mary or Elizabeth, although their simultaneous pregnancies were, after all, the point of the Visitation as a biblical event. What is composed by these means is a narrative painting that, in its communication with the viewer, privileges the direct assertion of the values involved, while it still negotiates the expression of these values through the images that constitute the narrative.

Another immediate impression created by the painting, as Capretti emphasizes, is its air of unity and perspectival coherence. Capretti argues that the use of linear perspective here serves as a structural parallel to the intense light that bathes the entire painting and to the work's unified iconographic significance as an image of the world under the empire of *sapienza*.<sup>389</sup> Indeed, clear orthogonals lead the eye from the foreground to the joined hands of Mary and Elizabeth (fig. 54) At the same time, a brilliant and honey-colored light pervades the universe depicted in the panel, while the life-size figures of Mary and Elizabeth provide the composition with strongly dominant and integrating core forms. Moreover, color linkages tie figure to figure and figure to

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389. Capretti, "Antefatti della Controriforma," 47–49.



background.<sup>390</sup> The bright clothing of Saint Nicholas on the lower left finds an echo in Mary's bright mantle, while the red of his cloak connects with the bright reds of the Massacre scene on the upper right, mediated through the dark scarlet of Mary's dress. In turn, Saint Anthony's dark clothing and forest green cloak on the lower right lead the eye through Elizabeth in her dark brown dress and mantle to the dark green of the tree's foliage in the upper left of the panel.

Yet, just as the painting's initial impression of conformity to precedent dissolves upon further inspection, the composition's unified effect is undermined by the abrupt disjunction between the smoothly terraced foreground, peopled by life-size figures, and the vast and distant background vista. That background includes the scenes of the Nativity and the Massacre of the Innocents, a city, landscape and distant sea, all pictured on a much smaller scale, as if at a great distance. The transitional middle ground between the terrace and the distant landscape has been erased. This discontinuity is reinforced by differences in pictorial rhythm. Instead of the spare, ample and smooth tempo of the foreground with its carefully disposed saintly attributes and large forms and blocks of color, the background vista is thick with decorative, eye-catching detail, profuse in its use of varied figures and landscape elements. The effect is of a panel split in two, a foreground stage and a vast background landscape.<sup>391</sup>

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390. Geronimus, Piero di Cosimo, 202.

391. Capretti refers to the "scenographic" character of Piero's composition, and to the possible influence of mystery plays on Piero's composition ("Antefatti della Controriforma," 47). (See also Geronimus, Piero di Cosimo, 203.) She does not explain, however, how this *scenographia* that relies on the splitting of the image between stage and backdrop can be reconciled with her argument for a fundamentally unified composition.

However, the division of the painting into two spatial zones itself rapidly unravels into more complex subdivisions that affect both foreground terrace and background landscape. The painting's foreground includes two planes, an immediate foreground occupied by Saints Nicholas and Anthony and their attributes and, close behind them, the slightly elevated zone where Mary and Elizabeth meet. The two male saints sit close to the picture plane, backed up against identical, smoothly dark vertical structures that, at first glance, merge into the vertical lines of the tall buildings further into the background. We cannot tell what these objects represent and whether they are actually dark in hue or simply caught in *contre-jour*. Their very opacity allows our conscious mind to forget them, while, unconsciously, we still feel their effects. In formal terms, the structures act as *repoussoirs*, pulling the saints and the ground on which they sit forward, framing and simultaneously pushing back the slightly elevated flooring on which Mary and Elizabeth stand, and thus accentuating the separation of both zones from each other, despite their actual proximity.<sup>392</sup>

The terraced flooring that supports the central figures of Mary and her cousin is set apart by its slight elevation, its distinct rose color and, as we noted, the dark vertical structures behind Nicholas and Anthony. It is true that several of the saints' attributes—the handle of Anthony's staff, his book or binder and one of Nicholas's balls—rest on the terrace occupied by Mary and Elizabeth. Here again, however, Piero introduces a further refinement in the interplay between connection and separation: the saints' homely

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392. It is possible that Piero derived this inner frame from the similar dark verticals in Filippino Lippi's Nerli altarpiece. As I discuss in chap. 4 of this dissertation, Filippino's structures evidently serve to integrate the black-clad foreground figures into his brightly hued painting, and indeed, at the top of Filippino's panel, the side verticals dissolve into elements of the setting. Since Piero's black structures do not appear to respond to an evident compositional need, they may derive from Filippino's panel, rather than vice versa, an argument that supports my suggestion that Piero's panel was painted after 1497, the date of Mico d'Uguccione's will, *supra*, 114, n.11. The latest date given to the Nerli altarpiece is about 1494.

attributes are placed on only the extreme front edge of the elevated terrace, and that front edge retains the same honey-sand color as the foreground flooring on which the saints are seated. The spatial disconnect between the male and female pairs of Visitation figures is accentuated by stylistic differences. The mundane and painstakingly textured details of the immediate foreground contrast with the monumental ovoid forms of Mary and Elizabeth distinctive in their simplicity or transparency. Mary stands in perfect profile, parallel to the picture plane. Elizabeth is clothed in a mantle and *gamurra* of the same dark brown material so that the outline of her form, delineated against the golds and greens of the background, seizes the eye.

Like the foreground, the background landscape splits into spatial compartments that lead us to further compositional distinctions. The vast background landscape is separated from Mary and Elizabeth on their raised terrace by what appears to be a vacant terrain—inhabited by one pig-- glimpsed to their left and right. This intermediate terrain and the distant landscape are themselves distinct from the two circumscribed urban settings in which the Nativity and the Massacre take place. At the same time, as we noted above, the overall background vista is divided among symmetrical, yet antagonistic, left and right sides and, in the distance, a further landscape of countryside, hilltop and sea. Despite the beholder's initial impression of coherence, the number of pictorial spaces displayed in the panel and the abrupt transitions in style and rhythm between many of them eventually devolve for the viewer into a collection of juxtaposed fragments.<sup>393</sup>

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393. The hybrid character of the Visitation, as a narrative image that also includes the foreground saints typical of a *sacra conversazione*, clearly contributes to this effect of fragmentation. While we expect the painting to communicate with the narrative fluidity of a Visitation image, Piero's composition speaks to us, as well, in the structural, even architectural, language of the Santo Spirito *sacra conversazione* in the left transept (e.g., fig 13), compositions that convey relationships through—for instance—symmetry, parallelism and the use of pronounced middle and background verticals to balance the low masses of the foreground.

Indeed, Fermor mentions Piero's Visitation specifically as an instance of the artist's tendency to create altarpieces that have a disconnected and additive quality.<sup>394</sup> It is also true, however, that Piero was entirely capable of executing large paintings that were tightly composed and highly integrated, such as the Pala Pugliese and the Innocenti altarpiece, both roughly contemporary works.<sup>395</sup> Within the context of Piero's oeuvre, fragmentation may function as a call for the viewer's specifically intellectual arousal and involvement. The more obvious examples are two late altarpieces, the 1505 Incarnation with Saints Catherine of Alexandria, Margaret, John the Evangelist, Peter, Filippo Bellizzi and Antoninus and, particularly, the 1515–16 Immaculate Conception with Saints Augustine, Bernard, Francis, Jerome, Thomas Aquinas and Anselm of Aosta (fig. 55). The subject of both works is conceptual and highly complex.<sup>396</sup> As a result, the work of depicting relationships within a constellation of values by making distinctions and formulating connections among figures and landscape elements is an intellectually creative task imposed upon the beholder under the guidance of the image.

The compositional complexity of Piero's Visitation suggests that it calls for, not one, but multiple and diverse readings that require the reader to assume a variety of specific attitudes toward space, linkage and continuity as they are manifested in the painting. We saw already that the altarpiece offers to a viewer's immediate perception many of the compositional cues of a traditional Visitation image. The beholder must then unread those cues in order to assimilate the architecture of the painting. This initial shift

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394. Fermor, Piero di Cosimo, 126.

395. Ibid., figs. 56, 57.

396. Geronimus, Piero di Cosimo, 236–41.

in perspective itself alerts us to the work's purposive, explicit and highly nuanced effort to communicate.

### **1. Rhetoric**

The detailed articulation in Piero's painting between foreground terrace, middle-ground terrace, and background landscape suggests a self-consciousness and a calculated readiness on the part of painting and painter for engagement with the viewer. The beholder who lingers before the painting, as she moves from one plane to the next, finds herself engaged in a series of distinct pictorial encounters and is thus progressively implicated in the unfolding of the narrative and argument. Not surprisingly, the three principal sections of the painting, the background landscape including the biblical vignettes, the immediate foreground with its seated male saints and the central Visitation, have respectively an affinity to the three classical sources of rhetorical persuasion: pathos, the incitement of the audience's emotions; ethos, the character and the social and moral standing of the speaker as it appears in his argument; and logos, that argument itself.

The background of Piero's panel, enlivened with pictorial detail, bodies in movement and narrative vignettes, raises at once the tempo of the image and the tenor of its emotional character and moves us to pathetic effect. The pathos very much depends on contrasts between the sharply illuminated dramatic high point of the Massacre, the subdued Nativity and the radiant landscape vista with its seemingly endless variety of jewel-like terrains, reaching up to distant mountains and out to the sea. Piero's landscape belongs to a rhetorical aesthetic tradition that conceived of the delightful in terms of

*copia* and *varietas*.<sup>397</sup> The sense of joyful wonder evoked by that landscape is entirely appropriate to the scriptural locus of the Visitation, immediately before Mary's Magnificat, and to its liturgical locus at the hour of Lauds, dedicated to the praise of the Creator and all of creation.

The foreground, on the other hand, is centered on its seated saints. Shown reading/reflecting and writing/composing, they are presented as initial communicators of the discourse emitted by the painting, its ethos. Their moral stature as patron saints of the Capponi chapel, in the case of Saint Nicholas, and of monasticism in the case of Saint Anthony, guarantees our acceptance. The concentrated attention they bestow on the texts that they hold and their close physical proximity to the central event of the encounter of Mary and Elizabeth tell us that that narrative itself is the subject of their studies. A carefully conceived illustration from a 1490 Florentine Pentecost play clarifies the rhetorical role of the foreground saints within the overall composition of the altarpiece (fig. 56).<sup>398</sup> The central image within the illustration, set apart by its frame and its independent perspectival schema, depicts the descent of the Holy Spirit. Below that central image, three Carmelite friars are engaged in reading an open book. The oldest among them, bearded and seated at the center, reads aloud, while a younger friar gestures

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397. "That which first gives pleasure in the istoria comes from copiousness and variety of things.... So the soul is delighted by all copiousness and variety.... Frequently the copiousness of the painter begets much pleasure when the beholder stands staring at all the things there. However, I prefer this copiousness to be embellished with a certain variety..." Leon Battista Alberti, *Della Pittura* (1436), ed. Luigi Malle (Florence, 1950); Alberti, *On Painting*, rev. ed., trans. John R. Spencer, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1966), 75.

398. *La festa del Miracolo dello Spirito Santo*, printed by Barolomeo de' Libri. This play was produced at the church of the Carmine in 1489 by the Company of Sant' Agnese. As noted earlier, until 1471, when it caused the devastating Santo Spirito fire, the Pentecost play always took place at Santo Spirito. It is not clear why the 1489 play was produced at the Carmine. According to a contemporary, "They did the Santo Spirito festa in the Carmine, where it had never been done before, because the festaiuoli could not do it in Santo Spirito. They did it at the request of Piero di Lorenzo de' Medici who was a young lad. Nobody liked it." Cited in Newbigin, *Feste d'Oltarno*, 164, 207–8.

as if engaging in commentary and the third listens quietly. The framed image of the Pentecost above the three friars makes clear the subject of their colloquy. Nicholas and Anthony occupy a comparable position with respect to the Visitation at the heart of Piero's painting. They not only silently introduce the event to our attention, they reflect upon it and engage in interpretation, thus encouraging us to do the same. The verses from the book of Wisdom, read by Nicholas, may thus be understood equally as an exegesis of the Visitation and an encouragement to further study and interpretation.

The function of Piero's male saints as speakers—ethos—should be distinguished from that which ultimately speaks itself—the logos—at the center of the painting. Nicholas and Anthony are presented as sources of the language that mediates our understanding of the scriptural text, to be distinguished from the scene above which is the pictorial expression of that text itself. The distinction becomes clearer if we make use of the *officii oratoris*—teaching, delighting and moving—discussed by Augustine in the De Doctrina Christiana along with their respective styles: plain, middle and grand.<sup>399</sup> The saints are seated on the ground, their shoulders hunched over, their faces absorbed and intent. The details and texture of their appearance—Nicholas's wrinkles, the reflections cast on the golden balls at his feet, Saint Anthony's glasses and the bulging veins of his hands as he grips his ink bottle—have all attracted the astonishment of commentators since Vasari. While respectful, Vasari's remarks suggest a certain unease, as if the artist's attention to naturalistic detail seemed to him strained or overly intellectualized:

S. Anthony ... is reading with a pair of spectacles on his nose, a very spirited figure. Here he counterfeited a book bound in parchment, somewhat old, which seems to be real, and also some balls that he gave to the S. Nicholas, shining and casting gleams of light and reflections from

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399. Augustine, Teaching Christianity: De Doctrina Christiana, trans. Edmund Hill (Hyde Park, New York: New City Press, 1996), iv, (17) 34 – (19) 38, 220–23.

one to another; from which even by that time men could perceive the strangeness of his brain, and his constant seeking after difficulties.<sup>400</sup>

Contemporary scholars have written as well about the “hallucinatory clarity” of the saints’ depiction as well as its indebtedness to Flemish art generally and, specifically, to Hugo Van der Goes’ Portinari altarpiece, which had recently arrived in Florence.<sup>401</sup>

The visually mesmerizing, almost hyperbolic naturalism of the foreground saints contrasts with the unadorned directness of the Visitation scene itself as depicted by Piero. Hyper-realism is skillful fiction, not Truth. The “delighted” viewer, drawn in by the artist’s fashionably northern depiction of the saints, is met by plain teaching delivered by the pictorial embodiment of the Gospel language. The rhetorical character of Piero’s foreground naturalism as trompe l’oeil ornament, attractive artifice, distinct from the plain rendition of the truth, resonates with the unease that marked Vasari’s admiration of Piero’s skill. What is intimated here by this ornamented style is that the foreground of the painting, including the figures of Nicholas and Anthony, partakes of the detailed and textured, but also flawed and ultimately illusory, world to which we the beholders belong.

## 2. Perspective

Another channel of communication between the beholder and Piero’s painting, one that has specific rhetorical implications, is established through the projection of real space upon the flat panel of the altarpiece. Perspectival spatial projection of this sort, the stylistic hallmark of Italian Renaissance painting, calls upon the viewer to move visually

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400. Vasari, *Le vite de’ piu eccellenti pittori*, *Lives of the Painters*, 1:651. Vasari necessarily associated what he may have sensed as an excessive preoccupation with naturalistic detail with the organizing theme of his life of Piero—the artist’s eccentricity. Recent scholarship has questioned Vasari’s portrait of Piero as neurotic outsider, citing a lack of corroborating evidence and suggesting that Vasari found the material of his biographical construct in the *fantasia* expressed in Piero’s paintings. Paul Barolsky, *The Faun in the Garden: Michelangelo and the Poetic Origins of Italian Renaissance Art* (University Park: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), 93.

401. Fermor, *Piero di Cosimo*, 123; Geronimus, *Piero di Cosimo*, 202.



and psychically into the depths of the universe depicted in the painting. In Piero's panel, the rate of regression, measured by the diminishing size of the objects depicted, is highly inconsistent. For instance, the two trees on either side of the painting are immensely tall in comparison with the figures and buildings that surround them. Nevertheless, contemplating the towering foreground figures of Mary and Elizabeth against their vast landscape background, Capretti employed the Albertian topos of the perspectival window open to vision in breadth and depth.<sup>402</sup> Instrumental to this effect are the two objects that Piero has painted with such deliberate neutrality that we actually do not see them, the vertical structures that rise up behind the seated saints forming an interior frame and isolating the window view from the immediate foreground. The divisive effect of this interior frame distracts the viewer's eye from another salient aspect of Piero's treatment of perspective here, his construction of two distinct spatial zones. We noted earlier the tendency of Piero's composition to split into foreground and background, an effect that is mitigated by the compartmentalization of both zones into subordinate areas and by the virtually overwhelming dominance of the large forms of Mary and Elizabeth. This spatial rupture occurs in part because each zone is anchored to a separate perspectival grid with distinct vanishing points (fig. 54).

The foreground orthogonals follow the top edge of the left page of Nicholas's open book and the top edge of Anthony's letter; they meet at the center of the clasped hands of Mary and Elizabeth. The background orthogonals are traced by the steps leading, on either side, up to the scenes of the Nativity and the Massacre of the Innocents,

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402. Capretti, "Antefatti della Controriforma," 47.

and converge at the edge of Mary's left-hand sleeve, midway between the figures of Mary and Elizabeth.<sup>403</sup>

The foreground orthogonals follow the top edge of Nicholas's book on the one hand and of Anthony's letter on the other to meet at the joined hands of Mary and Elizabeth. One reason that the transition between perspectival zones does not force itself upon the viewer's consciousness is that it does not actually coincide with the division between foreground terrace and background landscape. The background perspective grid begins only at the edge of the two low walls set before the terraces on the left and right of the painting. In that background perspectival zone, Piero has employed the tools of linear perspective to create a vista whose epic reach suggests universality. The effects of perspective and distance here are related to that of Fra Angelico's early fifteenth-century San Marco altarpiece (fig. 32), a paradigm of spatially coherent composition which aims through its deeply receding "vista" to capture a feeling of cosmic breadth. As in the San Marco altarpiece, the entire universe—the earth, sky and the cities of men—is implicated in the Visitation landscape. James Elkins has written about the fragmented and object-dependant understanding of technical perspective in the Renaissance and distinguished it from that culture's highly abstract apprehension of a "universal perspective." Piero's technical use of perspective here is distinct from but at the service of this aspirational and metaphorical "art of perspective," which would strive to represent "everything in the entire world that our mortal eyes can see."<sup>404</sup>

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403. More specifically, the top edge of the right-hand page of Nicholas's book—but not the edge of Anthony's letter—actually runs parallel to the background orthogonal and thus introduces that orthogonal into the foreground, perhaps to ease visually the transition from foreground to background (fig. 54).

404. "The celestial bodies and firmament; the terrestrial things—mountains, valleys, buildings, castles, cities, villages and landscapes—and other things: in sum, everything known to vision, whether near or far,

Something of the desired effect of such a universal panorama can be surmised from the 1498 sermon delivered by Mariano da Genazzano, then prior general of the Augustinian Hermits, to Pope Alexander VI.<sup>405</sup> Fra Mariano argued in that sermon that the language of Psalm 21 not only prefigured the Crucifixion but described the events of the Passion so clearly that it was the “perfect” mirror of the Gospel account. In this, Mariano asserted, the psalm could be compared to a small panel painting that depicts in great detail all possible varieties of landscape, including images of the sea and sky. In other words, one short psalm replicates the entire Gospel narrative of the Passion, just as one small painted panel reproduces the reality of the cosmos.<sup>406</sup>

We noted above the association of Visitation landscapes generally with the joyful liturgy of Lauds and the simultaneous evocation of rhetorical pathos out of the contrast between the Massacre of the Innocents and the delights of the landscape. What is as well integral to the landscape’s spell, Mariano tells us, is the fact that it plays at replicating reality. It is the convergence in the painted landscape of the ambitions of *perspectiva universalis*, the delights of *copia* and *varietà* and the careful effects of naturalism, derived, at least in part, from techniques of perspectival construction, that provoked Fra Mariano’s enthusiasm and that, in the case of Piero’s panel, bathes the Visitation

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high or low.” Wenzel Jamnitzer, Perspectiva Corporum Regularium ... (Nürnberg, 1568; Facsimile, Paris: A. Brioux, 1964), author’s preface, cited in James Elkins, The Poetics of Perspective (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 48.

405. Discussed *supra*, 33, n. 83.

406. Mariano da Genazzano, Oratio de passione Jesu Christi (Rome: Eucharius Silber, 13 april 1498, Repertorium Bibliographicum 7555, Indice generale degli incunabili nelle biblioteche italiane 6186), in appendix to Deramaix, “Consumatum est,” trans. M. Deramaix, 189. Thus, in pursuing the theme of his sermon, the source and role of prophecy within the contemporary church, Fra Mariano narrowly restricted the field of prophecy to the typological identification of the Old Testament and the New. As we saw, Fra Mariano’s argument has been largely interpreted in political terms as an attack on Savonarola’s claims of personal prophetic power (Deramaix, “Consumatum est,” 181).

landscape with an atmosphere of delighted wonder. We spoke earlier of the stripped-down encounter of Mary and Elizabeth as the rhetorical manifestation of *logos* or Truth, a manifestation that contrasts with the hypernaturalistic ornaments of the foreground saints. The background landscape, as well, displays itself as a naturalistic tour de force that elicits delight from the appearance of the real. What is real, in history and forever, is Mary and Christ's Visitation.

### **3. Surface**

We have discussed the relationship between beholder and Piero's altarpiece in terms of the beholder's visual access into and through dual perspectival zones. At the same time, by their sheer size and the monumentality of their depiction, the group of Mary and Elizabeth has an overwhelming prominence that creates unity from its centrifugal pull. An approach to the painting that takes full account of the female figures' importance thus complements the more naturalistic and linear approach in which we engaged earlier. Such a concentric reading illuminates the way the male saints, the distant landscape details and evocations of Christian history all revolve around the central image of Mary and Elizabeth's encounter.

The perspectival enterprise, pursued by two separate sets of orthogonals with their respective vanishing points, is actually undermined by the coincidence of these vanishing points with the figures of Mary and Elizabeth. Their joined hands, located at the juncture point of the foreground orthogonals, are also placed at the exact center of the picture plane measured horizontally and immediately above that center measured vertically. To observe the clasped hands is thus to be brought back from a locus in depth to the picture plane itself. A similar effect is produced by the background vanishing point located

midway between Mary and Elizabeth (fig. 54). Following the background orthogonals deep into the landscape, we find ourselves suddenly locked in between their converging figures, as if, in some sense, we had never left them behind. Despite its apparent depth or depths, Piero's composition appears continually drained of space and returned to its core figuration—the meeting of Mary and Elizabeth and thus, ultimately, to its surface.

A comparable erasure of depth is created by the position of the two male saints. They are seated looking down at their work so that the tops of their bald heads are precisely level with the floor of the two “terraces” or “piazzas” on which the Nativity and the Massacre of the Innocents take place. Objects perceived in nature are, of course, not usually so conveniently juxtaposed or so symmetrically organized. It is, in fact, an irritant for the viewer to contemplate the tidy and convenient position of the saints' heads with the expectation—provoked by the use of perspective elsewhere in the panel—of a naturalistic treatment of figures and objects placed behind each other. Piero certainly had the skill to raise one of the saints' heads so that it would overlap with the terrace flooring and thus reassert the presence of a spatial depth between the foreground saint and the biblical episode. If he did not do so, it may be because he was interested in representing here, not the spatial relationship between objects—the saint, the narrative vignette, the landscape behind the vignette—but the substantive association between these same objects.

Like many other fifteenth-century Italian painters, Piero appears to have been willing to construct meaning through the surface proximity of objects located at different

depths within the image.<sup>407</sup> Because such a surface reading discounts depth, it mimics the actual reading of words on the page. We are thus coaxed into “reading” both sides of the Visitation without regard as to where the components of the image are placed in depth. Clearly, what matters here, what the viewer must perceive, is the bond between one object and another within a vertical or horizontal progression. On the left side of the panel, we may read up, so to speak, from Saint Nicholas hunched over the book of Wisdom, to the Nativity scene immediately above, where the tiny figure of Mary is bowed in prayer over the Christ Child who is Wisdom (fig. 57). The parallel postures of Nicholas and Mary are precisely correlated details that only a careful and intimate reading of the panel’s surface might reveal. Moving further up, above the Nativity scene, the road that winds up the rocky hill is open and sunlit. Yet, Piero chose to place the approaching cortege of the three kings in the deep shadow of a cliff-like rock formation so that it is difficult to make out and almost impossible to identify. Although students of the painting, such as Capretti, assert that the Magi are approaching down the mountain path,<sup>408</sup> it is in fact only by extrapolating from the Nativity scene that we can guess at the identity of the cortege. More significantly, only a careful examination shows us why the retinue of the three kings is gathered under the shadow of the rock. A large boulder has slipped from the escarpment, blocking the path of the Magi. The members of their train will be obliged to thread their way slowly one by one around the rock and down the path. In light of this obstacle, the Magi’s journey becomes a likely subject of reflection within the context of the altarpiece’s principal subject, the Visitation. Like Mary, the Magi

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407. The most vivid example may be Botticelli’s Madonna del Padiglione (fig. 34), whose surface reading I discussed in chapter 2. The open book in the background of that painting engages with the jet of milk in the foreground as if they were located on the same plane.

408. Capretti, “Antefatti della Controriforma,” 50; Geronimus, Piero di Cosimo, 202.

undertake a journey whose purpose is a revelation; like Elizabeth they are impelled by the Holy Spirit to perceive the divinity of Mary's child. Their encounter with the infant in the manger is itself a "visitation" manifesting to these who can see Christ, Wisdom enfleshed.

This detail-focused reading, apt to stop and to expand laterally in search of narrative or spiritual context, encourages in the beholder a probing, searching focus on each of the different figures and detailed vignettes in the painting. Just such a concentrated focus on a progression of connected loci is the premise of a medieval meditative praxis. Although the twelfth-century Augustinian Canon Hugh of Saint Victor tied meditation—albeit loosely—to the act of reading, his definition applies equally to a meditative exercise focused on or inspired by a work of art:

Meditation is sustained thought along planned lines ... Meditation delights to range along open ground, where it fixes its free gaze upon the contemplation of truth, drawing together now these, now those causes of things, or now penetrating into profundities, leaving nothing doubtful, nothing obscure. The beginning of learning thus lies in reading but its consummation lies in meditation.<sup>409</sup>

Carruthers' discussion of the *topoi* of monastic meditation—the "gathering" of the fruits of memory<sup>410</sup> and the "ductus," the metaphorical path that leads from locus to locus in the memory landscape<sup>411</sup>—is also highly applicable here. Monastic art both encouraged and expressed such meditative work. The early fifteenth-century Florentine Thebaidas, paintings that depicted the lives of the hermits in Egypt, lead the viewer

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409. Jerome Taylor, The Didascalicon of Hugh of St. Victor: A Medieval Guide to the Arts, trans. Jerome Taylor (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), III, 10, 92–93.

410. Carruthers, Craft of Thought, 3.

411. Ibid, 79–80. We suggested in chapter 1 (*supra*, 43, n.162) that the modular architecture of Santo Spirito was itself conducive to mnemonic and meditative peregrinations, another map of a possible *cursus* at Santo Spirito is the one drawn in the area around the high altar by the location of the five altarpieces belonging to the cycle of Mary.

through a honeycombed landscape by a multiplicity of paths and stairways that explicitly link the loci of religious praxis.<sup>412</sup> In his series of altarpieces centered on the Adoration of the Child, the Carmelite painter Fra Filippo Lippi created a similar meditative blueprint integrated into a more naturalistic and emotionally expressive landscape (fig. 58). Paths and stairways lead the viewer up or down, through woods and ruined houses to discreet loci where Saint Romuald, the child Baptist or the Magdalene contemplate the mystery of the Virgin in adoration of the Child.<sup>413</sup> Similarly, the two shallow stairways in the background of the Santo Spirito Visitation lead the eye up to and down from the scenes of the Nativity and the Massacre. Farther back, mountain roads guide us to the approaching party of the kings on the left and, on the right, up a hill to a building which, as we will see, is very probably Saint Anthony's monastery. To some extent, the fragmentation of Piero's composition, discussed earlier, may be better understood within the context of monastic meditative practice, rather than primarily as a deviation from Renaissance rules of pictorial unity and coherence.

### C. The Augustinian Beholder

We noted above that one effect of the painting's false frame is to push forward the seated foreground saints so that they appear to be located outside the picture proper. As

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412. The Uffizi Thebaid is attributed to the young Fra Angelico and dated between 1415 and 1425. John T. Spike, Fra Angelico, 2nd ed. (New York: Abbeville Press, 1997), 21. Two workshop versions of the Uffizi Thebaid exist (ibid., 261). A similar work, the ca. 1470 Way of Perfection, in the Accademia in Florence, describes the lives of medieval monastics including Saint Bernard and Saint Francis. Bernardo di Chiaravalle nell'arte italiana dal XIV al XVII secolo, ed. Laura Dal Pra (Florence: Electa, 1990), 128–29.

413. The first of this series of three similar altarpieces was probably commissioned in the mid-quattrocento for the Dominican convent of San Vincenzo Ferreri, known as San Vincenzo d' Annalena. The second was painted in about 1459 for the chapel of the Medici Palace. The third was commissioned probably in the 1460s by the Medici for the Camaldulensian Hermitage at Camaldoli. Ruda, Fra Filippo Lippi, 219, 224, 230, 441, plates 124, 127, 131.



Capretti notes, the ground on which the saints are seated becomes a real space that is a continuation of the altar table.<sup>414</sup> Like the foreground saints of the Bardi altarpiece, but without the benefit of that painting's shallow depth, Saints Nicolas and Anthony are pushed forward into a shared space that is the chapel of the Capponi at Santo Spirito.<sup>415</sup> The empty space between the saints, occupied only by the sprig of wallflower, is reserved for the beholder, who is encouraged to take his place before Mary and Elizabeth. Piero's use in the painting's foreground of a northern brand of "extreme" stylistic naturalism, together with a striking informality in his figures' poses, necessarily intensifies the beholder's involvement with the foreground space. By far the most influential comment about the relationship between the viewer and the two foreground saints was made by Michael Baxandall. Baxandall referred to Piero's panel in arguing for the linkage between intercessory saints in quattrocento altarpieces and the *festaiuoli* of sacred drama, who mediated between the beholder and the events enacted, "catching our eyes, and pointing to the central action."<sup>416</sup> However, neither of Piero's foreground saints takes any notice whatsoever of the viewer.<sup>417</sup> The artist thus appears to have actually rejected

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414. Capretti, "Antefatti della Controriforma," 46.

415. We do not know, of course, how the altarpiece predella was configured. The bottom section of the mid-1490s Nerli altarpiece frame is not particularly wide, nor is it decorated with historiated images, as is the case of the frames created in the 1480s for the Corbinelli chapels in the left transept. If the *Visitation* frame resembled the Nerli frame, the predella would have not presented a barrier to the continuity of altar and altarpiece.

416. "The *festaiuoli* did not leave the stage between their appearances; instead they sat in their respective *sedie* on the stage, rising to speak their lines and move through their actions." Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 72–73; Geronimus, *Piero di Cosimo*, 203.

417. It may be that Baxandall's *festaiuoli* analogy, like Capretti's scenographic reading of the altarpiece composition, overstates the influence of dramatic performance. Baxandall himself may have been aware that the connection was a tenuous one. Referring to the *Visitation*, he notes rather vaguely that "this

one of the most effective and commonly used devices—according to Baxandall and his source, Alberti<sup>418</sup>— to link painting and beholder.

The foreground saints' isolation from the viewer is of a piece with their assertively informal character. Nicholas, a bishop saint, universally depicted wearing Episcopal garb,<sup>419</sup> is shown here in routinely "antique" clothing, to which a pleated and buttoned white *camicia* lends a contemporary air. On the other hand, Anthony Abbot, a hermit saint who was never ordained, wears, over the black habit of the Augustinian Hermits, what appears to be an Episcopal cloak with a wide and elaborately detailed gilt border. Nicholas's malformed ear and Anthony's pince-nez, neither of them attributes of either saint, reinforce the particularized and informal tenor of their appearance. As Capretti notes, Nicholas's folded ear is clearly visible in the profile portrait of Neri di Gino Capponi that decorates Neri's tomb, located behind metal latticework in the very chapel that houses the Visitation.<sup>420</sup> If the figure of Nicholas is not in all points a portrait of Neri di Gino, he is certainly identified with him and by extension with all the Capponis. Saint Anthony Abbot, considered, along with Saint Paul the Hermit, to be the founder of monasticism, was frequently represented in Augustinian churches and in these representations often wears the Augustinian Hermit habit.<sup>421</sup> In the Confessions,

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convention of the *festaiolo* has its counterpart in the logic of many paintings" (Painting and Experience, 73).

418. Alberti, 78.

419. As in Piero di Cosimo's 1481–85 Pala del Pugliese, in which he wears Episcopal cloak and miter.

420. Capretti, "La scultura," fig. 1. Capretti suggests that the folded ear may be a family trait of the Capponi.

421. He is present, for instance, in the Ambrogio Lorenzetti Maestà painted for the high altar of the first Augustinian church in Massa Maritima. Diana Norman, "St. Anthony in Sant' Agostino, Montalcino: An Augustinian Image in the Sienese *contado*," in Louise Bourdua and Anne Dunlop, eds., Art and the Augustinian Order in Early Renaissance Italy (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 57–161 including n. 5.

Augustine is informed by the Christian Ponticianus about Anthony of Egypt, “whose name was illustrious and held in high honor among your servants.” Ponticianus tells him of “the proliferation of monasteries, the sweet fragrance rising up to you from the lives of monks and the fecund wastelands of the desert.”<sup>422</sup> Augustine goes on to describe the profound influence of Anthony’s example on others, and most particularly on his own spiritual struggles. The seminal influence of the hermit Anthony belongs as well to the constellation of legends that surround the origin of the Augustinian order. As we have seen, the Vita Aurelii Augustini Hipponensis Episcopi, written at Santo Spirito in the 1370s, is the earliest extant *vita* of Augustine that refers to the saint’s two-year retreat in the Tuscan hills with followers of the first hermits, Paul and Anthony of Egypt. Before his return to Africa, Augustine is believed to have given these Tuscan hermits his rule, thus establishing his “Augustinian” foundation in Italy.<sup>423</sup>

The 1470 Santo Spirito compilation that includes the Vita also refers to a certain Saint Anthony, alive during the reign of Nero, who retired in solitude to the wilds of Mons Pisanus outside Lucca. This Saint Anthony—nowhere explicitly distinguished from Anthony of Egypt—is held to be the ancestor of these Tuscan hermits, who were later to receive Augustine and his rule.<sup>424</sup> Clearly, as Arbesmann notes, this narrative melding of the hermit Anthony from Anthony of Egypt, monastic model for Augustine, and Anthony

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Saint Anthony wears the Augustinian habit, for example, in a roundel from the frame of Simone Martini’s 1324 Beato Agostino Novello, painted for the church of Sant’ Agostino, Siena. Cathleen Hoeniger, “Simone Martini’s Panel of the Blessed Agostino Novello: The Creation of a Local Saint,” in Bourdua and Dunlop, Art and the Augustinian Order, 63, fig. 15.

422. Augustine, The Confessions, VIII, 6 (14), 195.

423. Arbesmann, “Vita Aurelii Augustini Hipponensis episcopi,” 341. Saak, 191.

424. Ibid., 342–43.

of the Tuscan Hills, initiator of the Augustinian order, encourages a further assimilation of the hermit Anthony with both the locus of the Tuscan hills and Augustine himself. The history of the Augustinian order and, in particular, of the Tuscan foundations of the order, as the Hermits themselves perceived it, would thus encourage the overlapping of the identities of Augustine and Anthony. In Piero's panel, the saint preserves the attributes characteristic of representations of Anthony—his old age, long ascetic's beard, bell, tau-shaped staff and pig. The Episcopal cloak, on the other hand, may belong to Augustine, founder of the order, whose place Anthony occupies as the founder of monasticism.<sup>425</sup>

Both Arbesmann and Saak agree that the foundational “myth” of the order of Augustinian Hermits—Augustine's monastic career in Tuscany and his transmission of his rule to his Tuscan followers—is likely to have arisen at Santo Spirito itself.<sup>426</sup> The Visitation altarpiece, which foregrounds the figure of Anthony/Augustine, thus speaks not only of the exemplary influence of Anthony on Augustine and on all monasticism, but of the order's foundation itself, pictured in the Tuscan hills that rise directly above the seated Anthony and shelter an imposing building of plain design that is almost certainly Anthony's monastery (fig. 59).<sup>427</sup>

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425. In an Augustinian institutional context, Augustine himself is frequently represented with the bishop's cloak over the Hermits' black habit, as in the ca. 1460 Vision of Saint Augustine, painted by Benozzo Gozzoli as part of the fresco cycle of the life of Augustine for the Church of Sant'Agostino in San Gimignano (Gill, Augustine in the Italian Renaissance, 88, fig. 38) and the Piero della Francesca Saint Augustine painted in 1469 as part of the polyptych for the high altar of the Augustinian Hermit church of Sant' Agostino in Borgo San Sepolcro. Il polittico Agostiniano di Piero della Francesca, ed. Andrea di Lorenzo (Turin: Umberto Allemandi, 1996), centerfold. The linkage between Augustine and the Hermits is emphatic in Botticelli's small panel of Saint Augustine Writing in his Cell, painted probably for a friar at Santo Spirito or San Gallo and dated 1490–94. Lightbown, Botticelli, 225, plate 91. In this panel, Augustine, like the Anthony of the Visitation, wears not only the black habit under his bishop's cope, but also the black cowl of the Augustinian friars.

426. Saak, High Way to Heaven, 233.

427. Piero may have derived the location of his monastery from Filippino Lippi's 1485 altarpiece, The Virgin and Child with Saints Jerome and Dominic, discussed in chapter 2 (fig. 41). The two works share as

The specificity of Piero's depiction of Saint Anthony raises another possibility as well. We have suggested that Neri di Gino Capponi with his secular clothing and deformed ear is cast in the role of Saint Nicholas. Could the figure of Anthony/Augustine also refer to a specific contemporary? As we noted, Anthony Abbot is almost never depicted in Episcopal garb. Moreover, there are no grounds in history or legend for supplying Anthony with spectacles. On the contrary, Athanasius tells us explicitly that Anthony's eyesight was keen despite his old age.<sup>428</sup> It is possible therefore that his spectacles, like his cloak, may belong to someone else. In the last decade of the fifteenth century, there was in fact a friar living at Santo Spirito who might have stood in for Saint Anthony, just as Neri di Gino Capponi stood in for Nicholas. That is the Florentine Guglielmo di Bechi, friar at Santo Spirito, prior general of the Augustinian Hermits from 1460 to 1470 and bishop of Fiesole till 1480, at which time he returned to Santo Spirito. As we noted earlier, Bechi was a master of theology, a translator of Aristotle, a preacher and a writer.<sup>429</sup> By the 1490s, when the Visitation was painted, he would have been an old man. Indeed, by some accounts, he died in 1491.<sup>430</sup> It would not have been remarkable if in his old age he had worn spectacles for close work. As former prior general and a bishop who voluntarily renounced the bishopric, he is likely to have

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well a hybrid character—Lippi's panel represents a rest on the flight to Egypt as well as a *sacra conversazione*—two male saints placed low in the foreground, one of whom is reading intently, and a broad background landscape that includes the sea.

428. "He possessed eyes undimmed and sound, and he saw clearly." Athanasius, The Life of Anthony and the Letter to Marcellinus, trans. Robert C. Gregg (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1980), 98. Athanasius' Vita was widely available in the Middle Ages. Norman, "St. Anthony Abbot in Sant' Agostino," 144 n. 7.

429. Vespasiano da Bisticci, Vespasiano Memoirs, 176–77. A list of his publications is included in David Aurelius Perini, Bibliographia Augustiniana (Florence, 1929–1938), 103–5.

430. Perini, Bibliographia Augustiniana, 103.

enjoyed considerable prestige within the Santo Spirito community.<sup>431</sup> His portrayal as Saint Anthony and, implicitly, as that other Augustinian prior and bishop, Augustine, may well have represented a gesture of respect and gratitude on the part of the convent.

If the figures of Saints Nicholas and Anthony are actually portraits of individuals, the same may be true of Saint Elizabeth, whose facial features are, to some degree at least, certainly sufficiently individualized.<sup>432</sup> Elizabeth's plain dark brown *gamurra* and mantle and her sober white veil are not typical of Visitation representations (figs. 52); they suggest instead the sober clothing of a woman associated with an order of nuns. On the other hand, though, Elizabeth is clearly not wearing the black habit of the *Mantellate* of Santa Monaca -- a third order of nuns under the supervision of the Augustinians of Santo Spirito-- It is possible that she is dressed as a *commessa*, a woman—frequently an older woman and a widow—who joined a community as a lay member.<sup>433</sup> Thomas has explored the relationship that existed in the fifteenth century between the convent of Santa Monaca and the Capponi clan. A number of Capponi women, as well as women linked by marriage to the Capponi family, were connected to Santa Monaca and provided financial benefits to either Santo Spirito, Santa Monaca or both. Thus, in 1476, the sister

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431. In his biography of Bechi, Vespasiano (*Memoirs*, 177) tells us that Fra Mariano da Genazzano, prior of the order, spoke at Bechi's funeral, which was well-attended on account of Bechi's virtuous life.

432. There is a precedent for such a portrayal at Santo Spirito in Botticini's *Santa Monaca and Nuns of the Augustinian Order*, in which the figures are strikingly individualized and may well refer to specific persons. Thomas, *Art and Piety*, 64. Although, as Thomas argues, the panel may not have been originally painted for Santo Spirito, it was clearly created for an Augustinian establishment associated with that convent.

433. Thomas, *Art and Piety*, 37. These *commesse* would also be categorized as tertiaries, regular if they lived in the convent, secular if they remained in the world. In 1399, a papal bull authorized the Augustinian superiors to welcome "maidens, matrons and widows who desire to serve God," under the aegis of the order. Gutierrez, *Augustinians in the Middle Ages*, 191. There were local variations as to dress: the Tuscan rule did not require married women to wear the habit; however, they "should seek to wear a dress of such color and quality of material so as to indicate a mortified way of life, resisting the comfort and luxury of the world" (ibid., 192).

of Niccolò di Giovanni Capponi agreed to supply yearly funds to Santa Monaca so that the Augustinian friars of Santo Spirito might chant offices in their church; Thomas hypothesizes that Niccolò's sister may well have been a *commessa* at the convent. In addition, many years earlier, when Santa Monaca had been only a fledgling community, Caterina d'Agostino di Gino Capponi presented her niece, the daughter of Alberto Castellani, as a postulant to the convent. Caterina's niece took the veil as Sister Veronica and became abbess of the convent in 1485, an event that must have redounded to the credit of the Capponi as well as the Castellani.<sup>434</sup> A portrayal of Sister Veronica in the guise of Elizabeth would have highlighted this achievement and underlined the relationship between the Capponi and Santa Monaca. More broadly, however, the portrayal of Elizabeth as a laywoman associated with a religious community is entirely compatible with the institutional references made in Piero's painting. The figure's connection with a female Augustinian foundation would serve to display the participation of these foundations in the history and life of the order. In so doing, it would complete the story of the Augustinian order that is presented through the merged figures of Anthony, Augustine and, perhaps, a contemporary member of the order.

Reference to fifteenth-century individuals who are or were actually present at Santo Spirito or one of its sister communities certainly complements the resolutely informal and hypernaturalistic presentation of the foreground saints. Since Vasari, commentary has focused on the stylistic aspects of that presentation while ignoring the

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434. Thomas, *Art and Piety*, 59. A third connection is a widowed *commessa* at Santa Monaca, Bartolommea del Pace, who in 1501 gave significant sums to Santa Spirito for the celebration of masses in honor of Saint Monica and Augustine and to celebrate annually the office of the dead for herself and her family. Thomas, "Neri di Bicci," 24. Botticini's mid-1580s altarpiece *Santa Monaca and Nuns of the Augustinian Order* was, at one time, located in a right transept Capponi chapel at Santo Spirito (fig. 15). Moreover, Richa, writing in 1761, describes the painting as containing portraits of Capponi family members. Richa, IX-X, 1761 and 1762, 26, cited in Thomas, "Neri di Bicci," 33.

originality of the saints' seated posture. While Anthony Abbot in his Augustinian Hermit garb brings to the foreground of the painting the entire history of the order, the saints' pose is an *invenzione* that allows them both to embody and act out in sustained, concentrated fashion the core praxis of the Augustinian Hermits, the fusion of eremitical and pastoral ideals. The former ideal envisages salvation attained through passionate interiority—meditation, contemplation and study; the latter pursues charity through the ministry that is teaching, preaching and living one's life as an example.<sup>435</sup> Individually representative of biblical study and biblical teaching, *inveniendus et proferendus*,<sup>436</sup> the discovering and enunciating of the truth contained in scripture, the saints together display the inner devotion, the disciplined *intentio*,<sup>437</sup> and the assimilation of study with worship that characterized the Augustinian Hermit ideal.<sup>438</sup>

Most importantly perhaps, both saints, seated on the ground, propped up against the dark panels that contribute to isolating them from the Visitation behind them, exhibit the seminal monastic value of humility. They recall fourteenth-century devotional images of the nursing Virgin seated on the ground, many of which bear the inscription “Nostra domina de humilitate.”<sup>439</sup> For Augustine, humility was a core virtue that manifested the radical reorientation of heart and soul toward God, and, as such, represented the first step in the spiritual progress toward wisdom. Both the gifts of the Holy Spirit, enumerated in

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435. Saak, High Way to Heaven, 283.

436. Mark Vessey, “The Great Conference: Augustine and his Fellow Readers,” in Augustine and the Bible, ed. and trans. Pamela Bright (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 60.

437. Carruthers, Craft of Thought, 15.

438. Saak, High Way to Heaven, 368.

439. Meiss, French Painting, 132.



Isaiah 11:2–3, and the beatitudes, described in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5:3–11, ground spiritual ascent—“the way of humility”<sup>440</sup>—in the fear of God, which resolves itself in “meekness” and “poverty of spirit.”<sup>441</sup> “Let us put a man about to make an ascent right in front of our eyes ... Whence is he going to ascend? From humility ... For, in the contrite and humbled heart itself, which God does not spurn, God himself has disposed the ascents by which we rise to him ...”<sup>442</sup> As in the case of many other monastic and mendicant orders, humility was fundamental, as well, to the praxis of the Augustinian Hermits as they sought to live out the core principle of Augustine’s rule—“To have one heart and one soul in God.”<sup>443</sup> According to the Augustinian Hermit Jordan of Quedlinburg, in his 1357 Liber Vitasfratrum, intellectual knowledge, acquired and dispensed by the reading and writing in which Nicholas and Anthony are engaged, was insufficient without “spiritual knowledge.” That spiritual knowledge, conferred by God’s grace through divine illumination, requires above all humility of mind: “The more one humbles oneself in prayer before God, the more God illumines him.”<sup>444</sup>

Seated on the bare ground, learning and teaching, Saints Nicholas and Anthony model for the friars of Santo Spirito correct behaviors conducted correctly. At the same time, if they do not acknowledge our presence it is not only because they are entirely absorbed in their reading and writing, but also because we too probably are friars, or

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440. Augustine, Enarratio in Psalmum 119, 1, cited in van Lierde, “Teaching of St. Augustine,” 44.

441. Matt. 5:3–4.

442. Enarratio in Psalmum, CXIX, 2, discussed in van Lierde, “Teaching of St. Augustine,” 45.

443. Saak, High Way to Heaven, 269.

444. Jordan of Quedlinburg, Opus Jor (Sermones de tempore) Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana; P.L. 448, 458 fols., sermo 197, fol. 307 vb., cited and trans. Saak, High Way to Heaven, 361.

perhaps members of the Capponi family—in any case so ordinary as to be unremarkable. No gap requiring the bridging power of the eye separates them from us. In this sense, Piero has gone one step further than Botticelli in creating the illusion of a continuous space encompassing the chapel in which the beholder stands.

If the foreground saints function as models for the altarpiece's friar-beholder, it is, in particular, as models of a specific type of viewing. Indeed, that viewing itself is at issue is surely suggested by Saint Anthony's black-rimmed pince-nez. As we have seen, one type of viewing fostered by Piero's painting is precisely the close, sustained, meditative reading in which the saints are engaged and which translates into a focused discursive "gathering" through the surface of the panel. The right side of the painting, rooted as it is in the figure of Saint Anthony, especially rewards a detailed examination of the picture plane, and the tenor and rewards of such a reading are particularly relevant to the friar-beholder (fig. 59).

Above Anthony's letter, albeit at some distance in terms of depth, the viewer notices the pig that is one of his attributes.<sup>445</sup> Depicted with the delicacy and integrity of form characteristic of Piero's treatment of animals, this pig turns his back on the city of Jerusalem and heads off into what appears to be a desert. The friar-beholder would be immediately reminded that Anthony Abbot too left the city to spend his life as a hermit in the desert. The viewer's eye is then led up from Anthony, his letter and his pig, to the Massacre of the Innocents, and specifically to the compelling detail of a white-shirted toddler who appears to be escaping down a wall. Immediately above the toddler, at the

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445. Anthony derived his pig probably from the Medieval Order of the Hospitaliers of Saint Anthony who raised pigs that were allowed to wander freely. Jill Dunkerton, Susan Foister, Dillian Gordon, and Nicholas Penny, eds., *Giotto to Durer: Early Renaissance Painting in the National Gallery* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), 268, plate 21.

center of the crowd of soldiers, struggling women and babies, one of Herod's men raises his sword above his head. This soldier stands out from the pallid creams, roses and grays of the surrounding crowd because, although he lacks the tonsure of a friar, he appears to be dressed in the black robe and leather belt of an Augustinian Hermit. The soldier/friar looks down at the child whom he intends to kill, while its mother, her face hidden, strains to push his arm away. In early disputes as to the status of the Innocents as holy martyrs, Saint Augustine strongly asserted that they died not only in Christ's name but in his place.<sup>446</sup> Following Augustine, the Church considers the Innocents the first martyrs for Christ, and celebrates their feast on December 28, within the octave of Christmas, represented on the other side of Piero's Visitation. This merging of sacrificial identities suggests that the friar is not only a participant in the Massacre of the Innocents; he is cast in the role of a tormentor and, potentially, of an executioner of Christ.

The appearance in the background of a Marian altarpiece of a Hermit friar about to murder the Christ Child, or, at least, his surrogate, is shocking but not inexplicable. Relying on Augustinian Hermit devotional texts, such as Jordan of Quedlinburg's Meditationes de Passione Christi, Saak has argued that fifteenth-century Augustinian friars were encouraged not only to meditate upon the events that constitute the Christ's Passion, but also to envision themselves as participants in the killing of Christ.<sup>447</sup> Late medieval preoccupation with the Passion reaffirmed and expanded the links between

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446. "The Church venerates these children as martyrs (*flores martyrum*); they are the first buds of the Church killed by the frost of persecution; They died not only for Christ, but in his stead." Augustine, "Sermo 10us de Sanctis," cited in Frederick Holweck, "Holy Innocents," in The Catholic Encyclopedia (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910), <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07419a.htm> (accessed February 28, 2011).

447. Treating Christ's condemnation to death, Jordan warns that by persisting in mortal sin, sinners themselves speak the words of the Jews: "He deserves to die" (*Reus est mortis*). Saak, High Way to Heaven, 480.

human sin and the death of Christ.<sup>448</sup> The purpose of the meditative exercise was thus to embody in highly concrete and horrific terms each friar's consciousness of his own sin. That consciousness in turn became the premise for penance and renewed humility in the hope of salvation offered through Christ's Passion and by God's grace. The meditative undertaking was explicitly visual in focus, its purpose being to create mental images that will awaken an intense emotional response to Christ's sufferings.<sup>449</sup> Saak's argument relied on the role in Augustinian devotional life of emotionally expressive images of the Passion that gave a prominent place to the Jews as participants in the torture and execution of Christ. Antonio di Biagio's highly emotive representation of the Journey to Calvary, painted for Santo Spirito in the 1490s, includes two such figures (fig. 14). The viewers of such pictures were encouraged, Saak believes, to identify themselves with the Jews, perpetrators of unconscionable sin and mirrors of the friars' own sinful state.<sup>450</sup> Similarly, the appalling figure of the "friar" in Piero's panel, sword raised to murder the most Christ like of the Innocents killed on Christ's behalf, would give pictorial expression to, and thus define and affirm, the viewing friar's consciousness of his own sinfulness.

At the same time, the fact that the blow has not yet fallen, that the friar, restrained by the mother's arm, looks down at the child who clutches his scroll or book, suggests that the fate of the child and that of the friar's soul still hang in the balance. Directly

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448. "The intensification was made from Christ having suffered and died for human sin, to human sin having been and continuously being the cause and agent of Christ's continued Passion." Ibid., 555.

449. Ibid., 476–505.

450. Ibid., 557.

above the arrested figures of friar and child, a fresco on the back wall of a low building displays Gabriel and Mary, who enact the Annunciation on either side of a narrow Gothic window. Higher up on the same vertical axis, the minuscule cross on the top of the temple spire points to the monastery on the hill, its cream stone set off by a background of dark trees, a white path snaking up to its front door.

The right side of Piero's panel thus offers itself specifically to the acutely focused meditation of a Santo Spirito friar, capable of traveling from the figure of Saint Anthony in Augustinian habit to the figure of the fallen friar in that very same habit, a friar whose ultimate sinfulness mirrors in exemplary and powerful fashion the everyday sinfulness of all friars. From the depths of sin, the Annunciation evokes the possibility of redemption effected through the very exercise of imagination, self-investigation and penance in which the meditating monastic viewer is engaged. The next step in this process of visually anchored self-correction is to follow the path that snakes above the city to the door of the mountaintop monastery, locus of reflection, repentance and prayer. The monastery itself leads us full circle back to Saint Anthony/Augustine and the legendary founding of the Augustinian order of Hermits and thus, ultimately, to Santo Spirito itself.

#### **D. The Landscape as Story**

A close reading of Piero's Massacre vignette thus reveals concerns with issues of individual sin and redemption. The landscape that frames the Visitation itself, in asserting the cosmic locus of divine immanence, echoes these issues of sin and renewal, while presenting the viewer with the coming of that immanence as a narrative of nature's unfolding transformation. The play of gesture and expression between Mary and Elizabeth itself reveals the rudimentary ingredients of narrative: With her three-quarter

stance, her half-raised hand and partly bent knee, Elizabeth initiates the movement of genuflecting or kneeling. What is happening here, to make use, again, of John Shearman's seminal question,<sup>451</sup> is that Mary approaches Elizabeth and Elizabeth greets Mary as the Mother of the Lord, while, simultaneously, they clasp hands. This encounter between Mary and Elizabeth is the first manifestation and the first acknowledgment of Christ's coming presence in the world. Although the isolation of the two principal figures from both the foreground saints and the landscape, their monumentality and the prominence of their clasped hands all create a static effect, the painting functions dynamically to depict an evolving story, albeit one that is imaged through the imprint of Christ's coming immanence on the natural world. In other words, the Visitation landscape, read both as surface depiction and as functioning space that includes the dimension of depth, responds to the "advent" of Mary the bearer of Christ.

The effects of Mary and Christ's arrival are immediately visible around her. Fermor, for instance, mentions the patch of grass behind Saint Nicholas's head and contrasts it with the bare ground above Saint Anthony.<sup>452</sup> Closer observation shows that the green patch belongs to an entire strip of grass immediately behind the terrace on which Mary and Elizabeth are standing. The grass that is visible between Mary and Elizabeth has dried to yellow umber, while the grasses on the right, visible between Elizabeth and Anthony, are burnt to dust in the stony ground. The patch of green on the left is clearly linked to Mary since it extends right up to her cloak, but, once past her body, it gives way to the yellow grasses. Nature, in other words, follows Mary, springing to life with her passage. The theme is developed further in the background, where the

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451. *Supra*, 3 n. 8.

452. Fermor, Piero di Cosimo, 169.

flourishing tree rising up on the left side of the panel appears to curve its trunk out to reach out towards Mary and follow the profile of her back.<sup>453</sup> Behind this tree, a large vertical rock, alive with green bushes, juts out in parallel motion so that the rock face, as well, appears to be leaning out toward the Virgin. The rock's curving hollows and rounded ridges animate its surface while they also mimic and reinforce the reaching curve of the tree trunk. The effect is organic, as if rock, trees and grasses were alive, expanding and reaching in imitation of and participation in the pregnant body of Mary. Indeed, the oval boulder that blocks the descent of the Magi appears to have fallen from the grooved rock face recently and, we are led to think, as a result of nature's ferment at the coming of Christ.

The presence of Christ is relevant of course to the distinction between the two trees, green on the left and almost, but not quite, leafless on the right. Capretti and Fermor link the bare tree to the dark cloud above it, associating both with a realm of death that contrasts with the life manifested on the left side of the panel.<sup>454</sup> More specifically, however, both trees in all likelihood refer to Christ's cry in Luke 23:31: "For if they do these things in a green tree, what shall be done in the dry?" Rob Hatfield has plausibly interpreted Christ's trope as a reference to the world, which is green when

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453. Piero used the same motif in his 1504 Incarnation, in which a palm tree bends over the Holy Family on the flight to Egypt, a motif that clearly alludes to the legend from the Pseudo-Matthew of the bending tree that responds to Mary's desire for fruit (Mundy, "Gerard David's Rest," 211–12) and to Martin Schongauer's 1470–71 print of the Flight to Egypt, in which angels bend down a palm tree for Joseph's benefit. More generally, in its chapter on the Holy Innocents, The Golden Legend (de Voragine, v. 1, 57) speaks of a tree that bowed in veneration to Mary during the Flight to Egypt. However, in its position within the panel and its particular curvature, the bending tree in Piero's Visitation most resembles Giovanni Bellini's far more dramatic laurel in his late quattrocento Saint Francis in the Desert. Both paintings share as well an exclusive reliance on natural phenomena, particularly light, as metaphors for divine presence. Gill, Augustine in the Italian Renaissance, 142.

454. Fermor, Piero di Cosimo, 169; Capretti, "Antefatti della Controriforma," 49.

Christ is present and dry when he is gone.<sup>455</sup> In Piero's painting, the two trees are clearly of the same species; they have a similar elongated shape and carry similarly shaped leaves. Since the tree on the right still bears some reddened, autumnal leaves, the species must be deciduous. Therefore, the right-hand tree is not actually dead; rather, it has lost its foliage with the turn of the season and thus holds the possibility of renewal.<sup>456</sup> Indeed, bare branches would accord well with the date of the feast of the Massacre of the Innocents, December 28. What are we to make then of the tree on the left, which is green on the Nativity, despite the autumnal colors of some of the surrounding vegetation? The green tree is a miracle that, like the patch of grass that has turned green upon Mary's passage, testifies to Christ's coming. Rather than a static opposition between a left side that symbolizes life and a right side that represents death, the painting describes through a greening of nature that supersedes nature's own rhythms the emergence of a new state of being permeated by Christ's presence.

The tale of nature's renewed vitality upon Christ's arrival is further developed through landscape elements that, once again, require of the viewer close examination and reflection. The demarcation between the terrace on which Mary and Elizabeth stand and the strip of grassy terrain beyond is shaded so as to suggest an actual drop. Although this is not immediately apparent to the viewer, that grassy stretch of ground is evidently lower than the terrace. As we move still farther back into the spatial depth suggested by the

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455. Rob Hatfield, "The Tree of Life and the Holy Cross: Franciscan Spirituality in the Trecento and the Quattrocento," in *Christianity and the Renaissance*, ed. Timothy Verdon and John Henderson (New York, 1990), 135.

456. Piero's representation of a truly dead tree in his famous Fantasy Portrait of Simonetta Vespucci (Geronimus, *Piero di Cosimo*, 54, plate 31) represents a stark contrast.



painting's foreground perspectival scheme, we encounter another shaded demarcation line and a terrain littered with stones and dried vegetation and inhabited, on the right, by Anthony's pig. In this case the small size of both the stones and the pig suggests a precipitous recession—in other words another, deeper drop. Thus, the terrain located beyond the paved terraces and the strip of grass is a valley, which only gradually rises up into the rocky escarpments, hills and mountains of the distant background. This topography, in which Mary must journey upland to seek Elizabeth, is appropriate to the narrative of the Visitation, since the Gospel of Luke tells us that “Mary rising up in those days went into the hill country” (Luke 39–40).

Precisely because it is lower than the foreground, this middle-ground valley is largely concealed by Saint Nicholas's head on the right, Saint Anthony's on the left, and, most importantly, by the large standing forms of Mary and Elizabeth on their higher terrace. What the beholder perceives is a patchwork of sandy terrains, some dotted with rocks or thorns, others shaped by dried grasses. Yet, the rhetoric of linear perspective that Piero has employed here compels us to embrace the asserted reality of his landscape, and to posit that that landscape functions logically and thus persists even where it is blocked from our view. Constructed in our imagination from the glimpses that Piero gives us, the valley that we “see” is a vast terrain of rocks, thorns and cracked earth that reaches the foot of the hill that Mary climbed to find Elizabeth and that extends up to and between the two scenes of the Nativity and the Massacre. The terrain of this valley, imagined as a visible totality, with its grooves and ruts of sand, its stones, brown grasses and solitary pig, is unmistakably a desert. Yet, the existence of this desert terrain, as an identifiable entity within the landscape of the painting, is so unstable that it remains almost invisible,

the victim of a kind of mental “disappearing.”<sup>457</sup> Not only is the desert partially concealed and fractured, it occupies a marginal location within the painting’s perspectival structure. As we saw, the background perspective zone begins at the horizontal formed by the boundary walls of the Nativity and the Massacre (fig. 54). The desert should thus be included in the foreground perspective zone, and, in fact, the vanishing point of the foreground orthogonals would be actually located within it, if the joined hands of Mary and Elizabeth were not interposed to become themselves the vanishing point. As a result, the eye of the beholder is brought back to the painting’s foreground, while the middle-ground desert remains oddly unacknowledged and unclaimed.

In the Gospels, the desert wilderness is freighted with ambiguous, contradictory sacred meanings. Defined primarily as a locus outside the society of men, the desert is the refuge of those holy persons, such as Elizabeth’s son, Saint John the Baptist, who seek to withdraw from the distraction and temptations of the world to reach God through prayer and inward contemplation. Saint Anthony Abbot lived as a hermit in the desert, and the portion of desert that serves as a backdrop for Anthony and territory for his pig should certainly be read within the frame of Anthony’s hermit life. At the same time, the desert is the devil’s domain, in which he appears to acquire unusual freedom of action and power. In his incessant temptation of Anthony, the devil distorts reality and confuses perception.<sup>458</sup> Anthony’s great predecessor of course is Mary’s Child, Christ, who also

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457. I use the term here to mean the escape of an image from conscious identification by the beholder. While looking at the Bardi altarpiece, we disappear the breasts of the Christ Child. In Piero’s Visitation, a somewhat similar “disappearing” affects the viewer’s grasp of the two dark panels that serve as the painting’s interior frame. We could also say that Piero’s fractured treatment of the Visitation desert allows the beholder to acknowledge the desert’s existence and immediately thereafter to repress it.

458. For instance, the devil throws a silver dish in the path of Anthony, who questions the dish’s actual existence, whereupon it vanishes “like smoke from a fire.” Athanasius, Life of Anthony, 40.

meets the devil in the desert and undergoes a period of trial.<sup>459</sup> For Christ as for Anthony, the desert is the zone where each encounters evil in demonic form, sees that evil clearly for what it is and, in so doing, takes account of himself and his heroic and saintly or divine role. The desert terrain, located outside the boundaries of the social and the normative, the shape-shifting abode of the devil who tricks the eye and the privileged space of religious visionaries, is a profoundly ambiguous space. That ambiguity is reflected in the sunken valley of Piero's Visitation, splintered, half-concealed and located between two spatial zones, neither of which entirely acknowledges its existence. Within the painting's narrative dynamic, which speaks of the greening of the world at Christ's coming, the sunken desert of dry sand and stone—and not the entire right side of the painting as Capretti claims—is a valley of death. This is evident at the very center of the panel, where we can make out, between the shapes of Mary and Elizabeth, a wedge of baked earth fissured with a spider web of cracks from which rises a dead thorn, naked and spectral. This is the desert of the Psalms, utterly familiar to the Augustinian friars from their recitations of daily offices, a wasteland that signifies emotional void and spiritual desolation, the utter absence of the consoling divinity: "For thee my soul hath thirsted; for thee my flesh, O how many ways! In a desert land, and where there is no way, and no water" (Ps. 62: 2–3). "I stretched forth my hands to thee; My soul is as earth without water unto thee" (Ps. 142:6). As the examples make clear, the topos of the dying, desert land, and its signified, the desperate, thirsty soul, include reference to their own antithesis, the water that brings salvation.

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459. Matt. 4:1–11, Mark 1:12–13, and Luke 4:1–13.

At first glance, it seems that Piero's desert terrain is immune to the transformative powers of Mary's approach. The section of desert located below the Nativity scene with its green tree remains arid and stony. Water and deliverance, it turns out, come from elsewhere: above the hills on the right side of the painting, and specifically above the hill that is crowned with Anthony's monastery, looms a storm cloud heralded by flocks of birds, some of which perch in the bare tree above the Massacre.<sup>460</sup> Rain is coming, we are told; it will fall over the hills, then over the cracked earth, and the dead thorn will bloom. Thus, far from being connected with death, the dark cloud signals the coming of Christ to earth and to the parched soul. In addition, the approach of the quenching rains clarifies the visual relationship between the beholder and the intermittently accessible desert landscape. In their advance towards one another the towering figures of Mary and Elizabeth block our view of the desert and, in so doing, already accomplish pictorially its virtual erasure—virtual because we are allowed to glimpse enough of the landscape of death, cracked earth and spectral thorn to understand what it is that this encounter between Mary and Elizabeth is erasing. The holy women, bearing Christ and the Baptist, prospectively obliterate the locus of death, which is the absence of God, while the world waits for the advent of Christ and the impending rainstorm that will redeem the earth.

The responsiveness of the landscape to the unfolding story of the Incarnation draws attention to another prominent feature of the setting, its pervasive effect of brilliant sunlight. As Capretti noted, light pours from a source situated to the front left of the panel, etching out the various textures of the immediate foreground, the smooth domes of

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460. De Voragine notes that one of the manifestations or signs of the Holy Spirit is the cloud: "A cloud is lifted above the earth; it cools the earth and generates rain." *Golden Legend*, v. 1, 301. The storm cloud in Andrea del Sarto's *Dispute over the Trinity* probably bears the same meaning. *Infra*, 389 (fig. 169).

the saints' bald heads and the grainy surfaces of their faces.<sup>461</sup> It allows the attributes of the saints and the bodies of Mary and Elizabeth to cast stark shadows on the flooring, sharpens the effect of parched heat in the glimpses of the desert and dramatizes the counter play of the symmetrical Gospel scenes—the Nativity in deep shade, the Massacre in fierce sunlight. In the distance, the light diffuses with a suggestion of atmospheric perspective into a white sky above a lavender sea. Despite the varied effects of shadow and dilution, this light, dense and honey-colored, is a continuous and pervasive presence within the painting, balancing its compositional complexity. At the same time, it picks out with particular vividness the creamy whites of Elizabeth's head scarf, Nicholas's book, Anthony's letter and the pale hand of Mary clasped in the darker hand of Elizabeth. As Capretti and others have noted, the direction of the light in the panel replicates the actual lighting at Santo Spirito.<sup>462</sup> The dramatic shadows that fall against the foreground flooring thus reinforce the notion that this flooring is an extension of the altar table and that more generally the foreground space of the panel is an extension of Santo Spirito itself. What is less clearly obvious is that the left-front lighting reaches into the desert, at least up to Anthony's pig whose trotters cast slanted shadows, but not much farther. An independent source of lighting directly to the left of the panel illuminates the biblical vignettes and the more distant landscape—in other words, the zone dominated by the background perspectival grid. This source of light is visible on the left side of the painting illuminating the segments of palazzo wall that are parallel to the picture plane. The facade of the left-side palazzo, which casts its shadow on the Nativity scene, is

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461. Capretti, "Antefatti della Controriforma," 48.

462. Ibid.

thrown into contre-jour. Although they derive from independent sources, the light from the front left and from the true left merge into one sustained and pervasive effect of light, which carefully mimics the physical effects of true light. Nicholas reads, Anthony writes, and Mary and Elizabeth gaze at each other by the physical phenomenon of light pouring in from center-left. With its honeyed intensity and dramatic contrasts of highlight and shadow, Piero's depiction of physical light compels the attention of the beholder.

In The Confessions, Augustine denounced the alluring aesthetic effects of true light in terms that are so exquisitely appreciative of its sensuous aesthetics that light takes on the character of a paradigmatic sensory experience. "Light is the queen of colors and bathes everything we see, and wherever I am in the daytime it flows all around me, and caresses me ... This imparts to the life of this world a seductive zest, dangerous to those whose love for it is blind."<sup>463</sup> Nevertheless, the dense light that bathes the Visitation is a pictorial sign of natural light painted so vividly as to be sure to attract and delight the beholder. The answer is, of course, that the beholder's attraction is not a distraction: in Piero's painting, as, more generally, in late quattrocento religious painting, the depiction of the physical phenomenon of light functions as a sign for divine presence.<sup>464</sup>

The symbolic association between light and the divine has a long history in which Augustine plays a significant role. For instance, the metaphor of light is used repeatedly in The Confessions to describe the saint's experience of a deeply subjective perception of divine existence as truth. Following his reading of "some books by the Platonists," Augustine enters:

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463. Augustine, The Confessions, 271.

464. Gill, Augustine in the Italian Renaissance, 140.

Under your guidance the innermost places of my being ... and with the vision of my spirit, such as it was I saw the incommutable light far above my spiritual ken, transcending my mind: not this common light which every carnal eye can see, nor any light of the same order but greater, as though this common light were shining much more powerfully, far more brightly, and so extensively as to fill the universe.<sup>465</sup>

Later, following his conversion, Augustine attempts to penetrate the mystery of God's creation through the Word: "Who can understand this? Who explain this? What is this light that shines through the chinks of mind and pierces my heart doing it no injury ... Wisdom it is, none other than Wisdom, that shines through my darkness, tearing apart the cloud that envelops me."<sup>466</sup> The workings of light symbolism in Augustine are tautological. If Divine Wisdom is perceived as light, the act of perceiving Wisdom, as well as any attainment of Christian insight, is accomplished by means of the spiritual illumination provided by the Holy Spirit.<sup>467</sup> Fusing the metaphors of divine light and divine illumination with the symbolism of the desert as spiritual thirst, quenched by Christ's rain, Augustine exclaims:

It therefore does not seem fitting to you that the unchangeable Light should be known by the changeable being it illumines in the same way as it knows itself. This is why my soul is like an arid land before you, for as it cannot illumine itself from its own resources, neither can it slake its thirst from itself. So truly is the fount of life with you, that only in your light will we see light.<sup>468</sup>

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465. Augustine, The Confessions, vii, 10, 16, 172.

466. Ibid., ii, 9, 11, 292.

467. "Augustine is clear in stating that the soul never ceases to be dependent upon God for its knowledge." Ronald H. Nash, The Light of the Mind: St. Augustine's Theory of Knowledge (Lima, OH: Academic Renewal Press, 2003), 111.

468. Augustine, The Confessions, xviii, 16, 19, 355.

God is not only Light, he is the only Light and the source of all enlightenment: “For it is you, Lord, who will light up our darkness. From you derives our garment of light, and in you our darkness will be bright as noon.”<sup>469</sup> Augustine’s use of Light symbolism to convey the universality of Divine Wisdom and of mankind’s intellectual dependence on that Wisdom resonates with the theme of a *universalia perspectiva* evoked by the cosmic landscape of the Santo Spirito Visitation. Light, as the divine manifesting itself in the cosmos, permeates the entire painting just as it penetrates all of creation. God is not represented in the panel, neither in the curve of Mary’s belly or a foreground Crucifixion panel as in the Bardi altarpiece, because he is everywhere present in the form of light. There is only one exception to the universal sway of light in Piero’s painting: the heavily shaded Nativity vignette on the left side of the panel. Accordingly, the Nativity is the only locus in the painting where Christ appears in person, as the minute but clearly distinguishable Christ Child in the foreground of the scene. In other words, Christ is represented in person where he cannot be palpably and pervasively immanent as Light. In Augustine’s words, “For it is you, Lord, who will light up our darkness ... in you our darkness will be bright as noon.”<sup>470</sup>

The Santo Spirito Visitation is not by any means the first representation of that event to give an important role to light. For example, in the Boucicaut Master’s Visitation miniature for his 1409 Boucicaut Hours, a fan of gold rays, originating from an invisible point above the illustrated page, floods the scene (fig. 60), while the Visitation from a 1420 Hours of the Virgin by the Boucicaut Master’s workshop is dominated by a sun that

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469. Ibid., XIII, 8, 9.

470. Ibid., xiii, 8, 9, 347.



emits tendrils of light into an orange sky (fig. 61). The Limbourg Brothers' Visitation miniature for the Très Riches Heures du duc de Berry displays a brilliant sun that scatters a thick rays of light particles down upon Mary (fig. 62). The particularly fervent Visitation image from the early fifteenth-century French Rohan Hours (fig. 63) is bathed in gold rays that burst from the group of witnessing angels arrayed at the top of the image. Finally, a late quattrocento Augustinian breviary from northern Italy displays Mary and Elizabeth within an initial, bathed in a mandorla of sun rays (fig. 64). Piero's panel differs from these examples in that the traditional gilt rays emanating from heaven have been replaced by an intense and sustained depiction of natural light. In fact, in his treatment of light here Piero may be said to have extended his deconstruction and reinvention of traditional Visitation accoutrements—the house facade, the distant city, Joseph and Zachariah—that we remarked upon earlier.

In medieval and early Renaissance painting the use of rays of light to symbolize the presence of divinity is frequently linked to the third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. The use of descending rays of light, often surrounding or emanating from the dove of the Holy Spirit, is familiar from medieval and Renaissance representations of the Annunciation (fig. 18) and Pentecost (fig. 56). These illuminations suggest that the Visitation, the initial encounter between Mary and Elizabeth, takes place in the presence of and under the particular influence of the Holy Spirit. We do know that the Virgin has just conceived from the Holy Spirit.<sup>471</sup> Elizabeth's son, John the Baptist, is "filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's womb."<sup>472</sup> Elizabeth as well, upon seeing Mary

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471. Luke 1:35: "And the angel answering, said to her: The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee."

472. Luke 1:15.

and feeling within her the joyful response of her son, is “filled with the Holy Ghost” and cries out “with a loud voice.”<sup>473</sup>

At the same time, Augustine’s extraordinarily influential doctrine of divine illumination—that one may come to an understanding of God only through the grace of God delivered through the Holy Spirit—grounded and nourished the Augustinian Hermits in their pursuit of “spiritual knowledge.”<sup>474</sup> “The proper function of the intellect,” wrote Jordan of Quedlinburg, “is true cognition and that cognition of the true comes from the Holy Spirit.”<sup>475</sup> In the Santo Spirito Visitation, the intense sunlight that pours down upon Mary and Elizabeth also illumines the foreground terrace including the attendant saints Nicholas and Anthony. Light pours over Nicholas’s open book, and in that Light, which is God, the saint cranes forward, utterly intent, to read in the book of Wisdom of Wisdom’s visitations. We do not know what the hermit Anthony is writing, but again Divine Light flows down on words that advise on the Christian life and the search for Wisdom. Above, the same Light embraces the rapt faces and locked hands of the Virgin and her cousin. What is thus depicted as occurring in the panel is the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, portrayed in the guise of light, at a moment of multiple spiritual illuminations, which are, as well, divine visitations. Simultaneously, another such illumination or visitation is, or should be, taking place: that of the spectator, who reads the illumined figures, transforming landscape, sinful friar, approaching rain cloud, all

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473. Luke 1:41–42.

474. Supra, 34 n. 67. He specifically identified this spiritual knowledge with one of the seven gifts of the Holy Ghost (Isa. 2:3), the gift of knowledge.

475. Jordan of Quedlinburg, Opus Jor (Sermones de Tempore) (Vatican City: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana,) MS P.L., 448, 458 fols., sermo 222, fol. 346, cited in Saak, High Way to Heaven, 500.

under the panel's golden light. The Light depicted in the painting, which moves the mind of figures and beholder alike, is a portrayal of the Holy Spirit at work, a portrayal that is clearly suitable in an altarpiece executed for a prominently placed chapel in a church primarily dedicated to the *Spiritus Sanctus*.

#### **E. The Inscription**

My approach to Piero's painting as a self-deploying landscape narrative provides, I hope, insights into the paradigmatic nature of the Visitation as both enabling and emblematic: the Holy Spirit's embodied "visit" to Mary and Mary's visit to Elizabeth establish and manifest on earth the Incarnation, which is the premise of Christ's visit to the individual human soul. At the same time, the Augustinian Hermit friar, the painting's privileged reader, negotiates through alternating readings the life-and-death issues of sin, confession, repentance, struggle and readiness for the redemptive visit of God. As we noted before, the beholder's reading of Nicholas's book will likely lead him or her to its subject matter, the Visitation, just as the orthogonals of the foreground literally lead from Nicholas's book to the joined hands of Elizabeth and Mary (fig. 54). We can now say that it is to the new immanent and transformative reality of God's presence—on earth through Christ and, potentially, within each of us through the Holy Spirit—that the language of Wisdom applies.

The verses from Wisdom in Nicholas's book follow the Vulgate translation of the book of Wisdom and read as follows:

Diligite iustitiam  
 Qui iudicatis  
 Terram sentite de  
 Domino  
 In bonitate et in simp-  
 plicitate co<r>dis/  
 querite illum ... quoniam  
 in malivolam animam  
 non introibit saepie  
 tia nee habitabit  
 in co<r>pore subdito

peccatis /Solomonis  
 sapientiae primo  
 capitulo/ spiritus enim  
 sanctus discipli-  
 ne effugiet fictum  
 et auferet se a co-  
 gitationib<us>, que sunt  
 sine intellectu et  
 corripitur a  
 supervenien-  
 te iniquit<ate>/  
 benign<us>

1: Love justice, you that are judges of the earth. Think of the Lord  
 in goodness, and seek him in simplicity of heart.

4: For Wisdom will not enter into a malicious soul, nor dwell in a  
 body subject to sins.

The Wisdom of Solomon First chapter<sup>476</sup>

5: For the Holy Spirit of discipline will flee from the deceitful, and  
 will withdraw himself from thoughts that are without understanding, and  
 he shall not abide when iniquity cometh in.

6: Benevolent...

The quotation, circumscribed by the demands of legibility and a limited space, omits  
 verses two and three of the chapter, suggesting that a specific interest in retaining verse  
 four—"For Wisdom will not enter into a malicious soul, nor dwell in a body subject to  
 sins"—and in including in its entirety the rather long verse five that refers to the *sanctus*  
*spritus disciplinae*.<sup>477</sup> What does the first injunction, to love justice, signify within an  
 Augustinian context? While classical philosophy defined justice as giving each man his

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476. The words *Solomonis sapientiae primo capitulo* are inserted at the top of the right-hand page of  
 Nicholas's book, presumably as a title for the entire inscription.

477. The first verse—"Love Justice you that are judges of the earth"—appears to direct the inscription  
 to persons in power. In abbreviated form the verses had the status of a political and legal commonplace.  
 They appear inscribed between the allegorical figures of Wisdom and Justice in Ambrogio Lorenzetti's  
 fresco of Good Government in the Palazzo Publico in Siena (see also Johnson, "Religious Paintings," 56).  
 In the sphere of the Just Rulers in Dante's Paradiso, the poet deciphers the first verse of the book of  
 Wisdom, spelled out by formations of dancing angels (Canto xviii, 73–93). Here the address may refer to  
 members of the Capponi family, many of whom held important political offices in Florence, as well as to  
 superiors of the Santo Spirito monastery. At the same time, the verse may also refer to Savonarola and to  
 the secular Florentine government allied with Savonarola following Piero de' Medici's flight from Florence  
 in 1494.

due, Augustine in the De Trinitate aligns justice with the fundamental Christian commandment to love one's neighbor (Matt. 22:39–40).<sup>478</sup> The love of neighbor is itself assimilated with the love of God (Matt. 22), the one commandment being implicit in the other.<sup>479</sup> Living justly is thus equated with the practice of the fundamental Christian tenets of adherence to the Truth, which is Christ, and to the imperative of *caritas*. Such an understanding of justice is compatible with the gloss that follows the initial address in Wisdom 1: 1: “Think of the Lord in goodness and seek him in simplicity of heart.”

The next verse cited, Wisdom 1:4, warns, “Wisdom will not enter into a malicious soul, nor dwell in a body subject to sins.” Wisdom here is given the full web of possible Augustinian meanings. It is the intellectual illumination accomplished through the grace of the Holy Spirit; it is God himself visiting the recesses of the human soul, and it is Jesus Christ enfleshed in the womb of Mary. *Sapientia*'s penetration of the pure soul thus encompasses here both the divine illumination that permits an understanding of Christian Truth and the visit of Wisdom experienced immediately and individually as the actual presence of God within. Augustine's brief experience of light shining through darkness—“What is this light that shines through the chinks of mind and pierces my heart doing it no injury ...?”—is just such a visit.<sup>480</sup>

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478. Augustine, De Trinitate, viii, 4, 9, 251.

479. Allan D. Fitzgerald, ed., Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1999), 481.

480. Augustine clarifies the distinction thus: “But different is the light itself by which the soul is illumined that it may see everything it apprehends with truth through the intellect ... for the light is God Himself ... whenever it tries to look upon that light it struggles feebly and fails. Nevertheless from this light comes all that it apprehends by the intellect as well as it can.” De Genesi at Litteram, XII, 31, 59, cited in Nash, Light of the Mind, 111.

The body not “subject to sins” is certainly that of Mary, who carries *Sapientia*, as incarnate Christ. But it is also the body of Elizabeth, pregnant with the Baptist and “filled with the Holy Ghost” (Luke 1:41). Elizabeth carries within her the wisdom of the infant Baptist illumined with the recognition of the divine presence. At the same time, she is herself filled with God’s presence through the Holy Ghost and illuminated with understanding of the Incarnation, its purpose and Mary’s role. She is, finally, both body and soul, the subject of Mary and Christ’s literal Visitation. As the epicenter of these multiple visitations, Elizabeth stands with Mary as the human exemplum, the soul without malice and the body without sin.

The last verse refers to the “Holy Spirit of discipline,” which flees deceit, ignorance and sin. We discussed earlier the painter’s use of light to depict the agency of the Holy Spirit within each of the figures. Here that agency is linked to *disciplina* so as to suggest a mutual fostering; the Holy Spirit promotes discipline and discipline in turn nourishes the Holy Spirit. The term *disciplina* had evolved during the early Christian period from its classical meaning of education or upbringing to signify the formation of a practice of obedience to an established code of conduct.<sup>481</sup> Through the Middle Ages, monastic “discipline” is presumed to have as its goal the attainment of wisdom through reading, prayer and adherence to the monastic rule.<sup>482</sup> In this case, the term *disciplina* may thus be interpreted to refer to a moral, intellectual and spiritual praxis accomplished

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481. Marie-Dominique Chenu, “Notes de lexicographie philosophique médiévale: *disciplina*,” *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 25 (1936): 686–92; Henri-Irénée Marrou, “Doctrina et disciplina dans la langue des pères de l’Eglise,” *Bulletin du Cange* 10 (1934): 5–25. The term *disciplina* is used repeatedly by Athanasius to describe the young Saint Anthony Abbot’s diligence in developing his eremitical ascetic praxis from the example of other holy men.

482. Ivan Illych, *In the Vineyard of the Text: A Commentary to Hugh’s Didascalicon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 51.

through the aid of the Holy Spirit, such as, in particular, the duties, strictures and rewards of the monastic life. The term is clearly used with that meaning in Augustine's own rule, whose language, read weekly to the friars,<sup>483</sup> underlies the values and observances of the Augustinian Hermits.<sup>484</sup> This final verse of Nicholas's inscription is thus directed in large measure at the foreground saints, Nicholas and Anthony, and at their alter egos, the friar beholders.

Saint Nicholas's thumb is placed squarely next to one word from that last verse, the term *corripietur*, as if the saint had progressed to that line in his concentrated reading. Strikingly, while the inscription in Nicholas's book is written in black ink, the word *corripietur* alone is inscribed in red. Given as "will not abide" in the Douai-Rheims translation, *corripietur* means, more precisely, "will be snatched away."<sup>485</sup> In other words, the Holy Spirit of discipline will be snatched away when evil enters the soul. Yet, why would the term be brought so insistently to the attention of the viewer, particularly when a similar thought is evoked by the preceding verbs of the verse, *effugiet* and *ausseret se*? One explanation is that our attention and that of Saint Nicholas are being drawn to the notion of separation, specifically to the idea of a separation from the Holy Spirit that is God. Precisely at the moment when Mary and Elizabeth stand face-to-face, hands joined, lit by the presence of the Holy Spirit in body and soul, Nicholas, seated with us outside the portal of Heavenly presence, reads of the Spirit's absence, its radical departure from the human soul—in other words, the anti-Visitation. The words of the

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483. A weekly reading was itself a requirement of the rule. "La règle de Saint Augustin," in Verheijen, *Nouvelle approche*, VIII, 2.

484. *Ibid.*, VI, 3, 26.

485. *The Pocket Oxford Latin Dictionary*, ed. James Morwood (Oxford University Press, 1994), 36.

book of Wisdom are the negative to the painting's positive. The red word *corripietur*, like the murderous friar of the massacre scene above Saint Anthony Abbot, impresses upon us the seriousness of its warning. The alternative to wisdom is ignorance, to goodness is iniquity, to God's presence is the utter darkness of his absence.

Another explanation—compatible with the discussion above—is that *corripietur* is used here as a pun that carries both the meaning of “snatched away” and that of “admonished” or “reprimanded.” *Correptio* is used frequently by Augustine in the sense of reprimanding or reproving in order to bring about a correction, an improvement in mind and conduct. Indeed, the admonishment of others, performed with gentleness and patience, is a requirement of *caritas*, the love of neighbor.<sup>486</sup> More importantly, in this context, to undertake and to submit to *correptio* is the duty of these that belong to the *disciplina* of a monastic order.<sup>487</sup> The benevolent correction of others in order to remedy conduct is a significant part of the monastic project, as indicated by the use of the term three times in the text of Saint Augustine's rule.<sup>488</sup> In Nicholas's inscription, the literal translation of the passive form *corripietur* as “rebuked” would make no sense as applied to the Holy Spirit, who stands in no need of being admonished. What is suggested here is a looser association between deceit, willful ignorance and sin, on the one hand, and the admonition and correction required by *disciplina* on the other. It is telling, in this context, that the index finger of Nicholas's left hand points down to the word *peccatis* at the top of the second page. Where there is sin and no simplicity of the heart, discipline, wisdom

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486. Tarsicius J. van Bavel, “Discipline (correptio, admonito)” in Fitzgerald, Augustine through the Ages, 274.

487. Ibid., 275–76.

488. Verheijen, Nouvelle approche, IV 9, VI 3, VII 3.



and the Holy Spirit itself will vanish, and their flight must be read as both punishment and warning that self-correction is required.

The conjunction of *disciplina*, *correptio* and *peccatis* in Nicholas's text, reinforced by the political freight of the passage's address—"Love Justice you who are Judges of the earth"—leads us to yet another interpretation. If, indeed, Piero painted the panel after 1497, its execution would either coincide with or follow close upon the dramatic dates of Mariano da Gennazano's legal ban from Florence, Savonarola's excommunication, read out at Santo Spirito, and his eventual fall from power and execution. The *peccatis* and *iniquitate* to which the text refers may thus refer to these both inside and outside the order who have not subjected themselves to *correptio*, and from whom "the holy spirit of discipline" has fled. This reading, as well, is appropriate to the specifics of the institutional history and character of the Augustinian Hermits displayed in the painting. What is emphasized, as we have seen, is scholarly endeavor conducted with the utmost humility, a conjunction evidenced in the crouching, studious saints, and the order's origin in the perfect simplicity of Anthony's asceticism. Thus, the strain of negativity that runs through the painting may find its embodiment, not only in the faults of individual Hermit friars, but also in those of figures outside the order, "Judges of the earth" lacking humility and malicious souls lacking "simplicity of heart"—in other words, Savonarola and his fellow friars.<sup>489</sup> If the figure of Savonarola does indeed haunt the painting, one of its functions, certainly, is as a warning to the religious beholder not to stray from the values of *disciplina*. The painting does not merely

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489. The Feast of the Visitation, established as a day of prayer for the unity of the church, also requires prayer "for assistance in the struggle of the church against her heretical foes." N. Randall Parks, "On the Meaning of Pinturricchio's Sala dei Santi," *Art History* 2 (1979): 292–94.

uphold the history and values of the Augustinian community against the devious folly of outsiders, such as the observant Dominicans of San Marco. It speaks to the viewer of the need for self-examination in light of that history and those values. The altarpiece functions in this respect as a mirror of defective humanity whose purpose ultimately is practical, real-life self-correction.<sup>490</sup>

At the same time, as we noted earlier, Nicholas's concentrated reading and Anthony's writing conformed to the praxis of the Augustinian Hermit order with its double emphasis on learning and teaching. Inhabiting, like us, a world whose very tangibility is illusory, Nicholas and Anthony attempt to read and write themselves out of this realm of unlikeness. Our own reading of Nicholas's book necessarily draws us to its pendant, the squared parchment on which Anthony is writing. As we have seen, Anthony's folio, like Nicholas's codex, serves as a marker for an orthogonal line that leads to the joined hands of Mary and Elizabeth and thus structures our perception of the painting's foreground (fig. 54). Yet, while Nicholas reads a book inscribed with an entirely legible quotation, Anthony writes in neat and minuscule script something that we cannot read. With an almost provocative bravado, Piero displayed in the foreground of his altarpiece and in the glare of its strong effects of light an elaborate sign that appears to have no signifier. One possible approach is to assimilate Anthony's script with the attributes arrayed about him in Piero's painting, the tau-handled cane, bell, pig and

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490. As we noted, the concern expressed in the altarpiece with issues of *correctio* and *disciplina* suggests that the inscription's address—*qui iudicatis terram*—may also be directed to the prior and other figures of authority within the convent. The fulfillment of monastic responsibilities for spiritual guidance and the degree of humility and caritas with which these responsibilities were exercised are the subject of several of the rule's provisions (see Verheijen, *Nouvelle approche*, IV, 6–9). At issue, as well, may be the responsibility of each friar for the conduct of his brother: a friar's well-founded correction of a fellow friar, as described in Augustine's rule, must be accepted by the offending friar in the spirit of discipline. Verheijen, *Nouvelle approche*, VI, 3, VII, 1–4.

surrounding desert that serve to locate and identify the figure of the saint. In fact, Athanasius does mention letters written by Anthony. However, he also tells us that the saint had not “learned letters”; in other words, that he had not mastered Greek or Latin.<sup>491</sup> His letters, therefore, must have been written in an Egyptian script such as Coptic. While Piero’s illegible writing is not actually Coptic, it would serve to remind the viewer that Anthony of Egypt was not a man of learning. Athanasius goes on to say that, despite his lack of “letters,” Anthony disputed with and confounded two Greek philosophers who had come to test him, concluding, “Now you see that in the person whose mind is sound there is no need for letters.”<sup>492</sup> His sanctity derives from “faith through love that works for Christ.”<sup>493</sup> Such a reminder would have had a pointed meaning addressed to the highly erudite friars of Santo Spirito, a meaning consonant with the inscription in Nicholas’s book and with the Augustinian Order’s fundamental valuation of ethical and devotional praxis over intellectual prowess.<sup>494</sup>

At the same time, like much else in the Santo Spirito Visitation, Anthony’s writing lays the ground for a meditative exercise. Because it is unreadable, his letter remains multivalent, receptive to an array of shifting meanings constructed out of the beholder’s store of knowledge about the hermits of the Thebaid and by the evolving course of his meditative associations. The viewer might, for instance, ascribe to Piero’s

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491. Athanasius, Life of Anthony, 83–84. Seven extant letters are still ascribed to Anthony. McGinn, Foundations of Mysticism, 381 n. 13.

492. Athanasius, Life of Anthony, 84. The “illiterate” Anthony’s closeness to God would have reminded the friars of Augustine’s own contention that “people supported by faith, hope and charity, and retaining a firm grip on them, have no need of the scriptures except for instructing others. And so there are many who live by these three even in the desert without books.” Augustine, De Doctrina Christiana, 125.

493. Athanasius, Life of Anthony, 89.

494. Saak, High Way to Heaven, 360.

Anthony one of two letters actually written by the saint in his old age, according to Athanasius. In one, Anthony castigated the Arian military commander Balacius for his persecution of the Christians. In the other, he responded to a request for guidance from the emperor Constantine Augustus and his sons. “He implored them,” we are told, “to be men of human concern, and to give attention to justice and to the poor.”<sup>495</sup> The contents of this last letter make, once again, the point that Anthony’s life and spirituality, in their Christian simplicity, fulfill the requirements of the book of Wisdom, which describes *sapientia*’s attainment in terms that are primarily ethical and resolutely simple. We are required to pursue justice, defined as “goodness and simplicity of heart” for the Holy Spirit will “visit” only the souls of the just.

#### **F. The *Junctio Dextrarum***

The lessons in Wisdom conveyed in Nicholas’s inscription are fully reflected in the encounter of Mary and Elizabeth depicted above. That is in literal terms what Piero’s panel tells us in adopting the book and the letter as foreground orthogonals that lead to the vanishing point of the two women’s joined hands. We noted earlier that Mary and Elizabeth’s hands were vividly lit and that they were situated, not only at the fulcrum of the painting conceived as a construct in depth, but also at the exact horizontal center of the panel’s surface plane and very close to its vertical center. Moreover, in the center foreground of the panel a sprig of gillyflower immediately focuses the eye on the painting’s central axis, while above, at the summit of that axis, a protruding cloud formation, delicately and carefully under-lit, functions almost literally as a pointer to the

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495. Athanasius, *Life of Anthony*, 90.

joined hands below. Clearly, the artist went to great effort to give emphatic prominence to Mary and Elizabeth's clasped hands at the heart of the panel.

Nevertheless, scholars have not engaged with the motif of the handclasp, perhaps because it replicates that most banal of contemporary greeting gestures, the handshake. Until the late Middle Ages, however, images of the Visitation did not ordinarily feature a handshake. Instead, the Virgin and her cousin, both caught in similarly extraordinary circumstances, embrace, as in Giotto's Arena chapel fresco, Andrea Pisano's Visitation on the south doors of the Baptistery or Ghirlandaio's elaborate fresco at Santa Maria Novella.<sup>496</sup> Johnson identified Mary and Elizabeth's joined hands—without further elaboration—as the *unctio dextrarum*.<sup>497</sup> The motif of the *unctio dextrarum* first appears in Roman reliefs that depict the marriage ceremony.<sup>498</sup> In monuments of this type, the bridal couple stand with their right hands joined, the gesture affirmed, in many cases, by the figure of Concordia behind them (fig. 66). One instructive commentary on the use of the *unctio dextrarum* in the Renaissance is Panofsky's discussion of a similar gesture in Jan Van Eyck's Arnolfini Marriage.<sup>499</sup> In addition to holding his bride's hand, Van

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496. A version of Mary and Elizabeth's *unctio dextrarum* – Elizabeth uses her left hand-- does occur however in Bernardino Pinturicchio's 1492-1494 Visitation in the Sala dei Santi in the Borgia Apartment of the Vatican. In that fresco, the gesture is prominent, but neither centered nor highlighted by other features of the composition.

497. Johnson, "Religious Paintings," 64.

498. Louis Reekmans, "La 'dextrarum unctio' dans l'iconographie romaine et paléochrétienne," Bulletin de l'Institut historique belge de Rome 31 (1958): 69–73, fig. 32, plate 12; Guiseppe Bovini, "La scene della 'dextrarum unctio' nell'arte cristiana," Bullettino della commissione archeologica comunale di Roma 72 (1946–48): 113–114; Stephen D. Ricks, "Dexiosis and Dextrarum Unctio: The Sacred Handclasp in the Classical and Early Christian World," FARMS Review 18, no. 1 (2006).

499. Panofsky, "Jan van Eyck's Arnolfini Portrait," The Burlington Magazine 64, no. 372 (March 1934): 123–25. In Van Eyck's painting the groom actually clasps the bride's left hand in his right hand. This shift, Panofsky believed, allowed the couple to assume a frontal and thus more stable posture within their domestic interior.

Eyck's groom lifts his arm in a gesture that Panofsky defines as the *fides levata*. He notes that Roman depictions of couples joined by the *unctio dextrarum* also included this gesture, which was performed by the groom as a confirmation of the matrimonial vow expressed by the handclasp.<sup>500</sup> In Piero's Visitation as well, Elizabeth raises her left forearm in a motion that appears too solemn and deliberate to be a simple salute, and yet could not be a blessing, since Elizabeth greets Mary with great humility as the mother of the Lord. Elizabeth clearly raises her arm—*fides levata*—to confirm the oath of union represented by her and Mary's joined hands.

The marriage symbolism of the *unctio dextrarum* is further reinforced in the Santo Spirito Visitation by the sprig of gillyflower, also known as wallflower, pink or carnation, placed in the immediate foreground. In the Middle Ages, flowers of this family appear to have been associated with love, and, more specifically, with the idea of a loving union.<sup>501</sup> In a number of portraits, probably executed on the occasion of an engagement or a marriage, the sitter holds up a pink or wallflower.<sup>502</sup> Hans Memling's 1485–90 Young Woman with a Carnation, in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (fig. 67), is now believed to be part of an allegory of true love. The young woman, associated with the higher elements of love and marriage, as opposed to the immediate gratification of lust, holds out a carnation, as if offering it to the viewer.<sup>503</sup>

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500. Ibid., 123.

501. Mirella Levi D'Ancona, The Garden of the Renaissance: Botanical Symbolism in Italian Painting (Florence: Olschki, 1977), 402.

502. Examples include the 1480–90 portrait of Costanza Caetani and Andrea Solario's 1495 Man with a Pink, both in the National Gallery in London. David Alan Brown, ed., Virtue and Beauty: Leonardo's Ginevra de' Benci and Renaissance Portraits of Women, exhibition catalog (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 2001) 140–41.

503. Dunkerton et al., Giotto to Dürer, 125.

In the Renaissance and later, the *junctio dextrarum* does make an appearance as a symbol of solemn union in images unrelated to marriage. The meeting of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba, as depicted by Piero della Francesca for the church of San Francesco in Arezzo, is punctuated by their solemn clasping of right hands (fig. 68). Likewise, the sixteenth-century emblem books of Andrea Alciato represent Concordia as two military leaders clasping each other's right hand in the *junctio dextrarum*.<sup>504</sup> Yet, of itself, Mary's Visitation of Elizabeth, as narrated by Luke, still does not conform to the notion, suggested by the examples above, of a lasting union that significantly and powerfully brings together parties that might otherwise have been apart. Mary dwelt with Elizabeth for a few months, Luke tells us, and then simply returned home. In fact, the very term *visitatio* refers to an encounter that is transitory rather than continuous. Clearly, the solemn vow of union represented by the handclasp between Mary and Elizabeth must be figurative of some other union, spiritual and/or institutional. It is instructive in this regard that ecclesiastical *concordia* was much on the mind of Pope Urban VI when, in 1389, he expanded the celebration of the Feast of the Visitation to the entire Church. He had hoped at that time that, under the influence of the new feast, Christ and the Virgin would both "visit" and, in so doing, heal the prevailing division of the Great Schism. Indeed, the mass for the Feast of the Visitation includes a prayer "indicating that the solemnity of the Visitation will bring an increase in peace."<sup>505</sup>

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504. Andrea Alciato, *Emblematum Liber* (Augsburg: Heinrich Steyner, 1531), sig. B4r.; (1534), 31.

505. William M. Voelke, "The Farnese Hours: Maraviglia di Roma," commentary in *The Farnese Book of Hours* (New York: Pierpont Morgan Library, Ms. 69; Graz, Austria: Akademische Druck-Verlangsanstalt, 2003), 24. See Frederick G. Holweck's entry for the "Visitation of the Blessed Virgin," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. XV (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912).

Piero centered his Visitation on the *unctio dextrarum* before the turn of the century, when that motif became a pervasive feature of Visitation iconography. Thus, a 1501 Venetian manuscript of the Officium Beatae Mariae Virginis includes a Visitation image (fig. 69) that clearly centers and foregrounds the clasped hands of Mary and Elizabeth. Among Florentine works, both Mariotto Albertinelli's powerful 1503 Visitation (fig. 70) and Pontormo's dynamic but damaged fresco of the Visitation in the atrium of the church of SS. Annunziata (fig. 71) include the gesture.<sup>506</sup> In both cases, the handclasp is clearly discernable and located on the central axis of the painting, as in Piero's panel.<sup>507</sup>

Before 1500, examples of the *unctio dextrarum* between Mary and Elizabeth do exist, although they are infrequent. A late twelfth-century deep-relief carving by Bonannus of Pisa at Monreale Cathedral shows Mary and Elizabeth, hands clasped, under an archway that may be the entrance to Elizabeth's house (fig. 72). Here again, Elizabeth

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506. The flurry of early sixteenth-century Visitation images that include a centrally located *unctio dextrarum* begs the question whether Piero's Visitation initiated an iconographic trend. The Venetian manuscript illustration places its protagonists within a stony terrain that recalls Piero's desert. Most striking in its similarities, however, is Albertinelli's monumental composition, which is sometimes attributed to Fra Bartolomeo. Focused closely on the two principal Visitation protagonists, it retains the sobriety and serenity of Piero's portrayal of Mary and Elizabeth. Mary's stance parallel to the picture plane and Elizabeth's white cowl clearly recall the Santo Spirito Visitation. The execution of both those works in the early cinquecento also argues in favor of assigning a later date to Piero's panel—between 1497 and 1500.

507. Later examples include an early sixteenth-century Venetian altarpiece painted for the Monastery of Sant'Andrea and attributed to Sebastiano del Piombo, now in the Accademia in Venice (Accademia Galleries of Venice, eds. Giovanna Nepi Scire and Francesco Valcanover [Milan: Electa, 1985], 170, cat. 275); a 1510 polyptych by Pedro Fernandez now in the Museo di Capodimonte in Naples (Nicola Spinosa, ed., The National Museum of Capodimonte [Naples: Electa Napoli, 1996] 42; and a 1584–86 altarpiece by Federico Barocci for the Cappella Pozzimiglio in the Church of Santa Maria in Valicella. Sixteenth-century variants on the *unctio dextrarum* occur as well, as in Francesco Salviati's influential composition for his 1538 fresco of the Visitation at San Giovanni Decollato in Rome. In that work, Mary and Elizabeth lean forward to clasp both each other's hands. Michael Hirst, "Francesco Salviati's 'Visitation,'" The Burlington Magazine 103, no. 699, special issue (June 1961): fig. 59. Another interesting variant occurs in a sixteenth-century German polyptych featuring the Annunciation and the Visitation; the work, now at the Pinacoteca of Bologna, was painted for a convent of Clarissan nuns. In this image Mary and Elizabeth clasp each other's right hands and left hands respectively, so that their linked arms create the shape of a cross.



lifts her left hand in the gesture of *fides levata*, and here again the handclasp is emphasized by its exposed and central position beneath the keystone of the arch. An exquisite early fourteenth-century sculpture from Constance displays a *unctio dextrarum* in which Mary's and Elizabeth's hands are placed one on top of the other with an effect of ceremonious calm (fig. 73). The mid-fifteenth-century English Berkeley Hours includes a delicate Visitation for Lauds in which Mary holds a book in her left hand and clasps Elizabeth's right hand in her own (fig. 74). The ca. 1440 Visitation in the Hours of Catherine of Cleves presents Elizabeth before a building that resembles a church clasping Mary's hand in the *unctio dextrarum*. In these last two cases, significantly, neither woman looks at the other; instead they gaze down at their joined hands as if they understood the gesture to have significance. In all these cases the *unctio dextrarum* is made clearly visible and has a deliberate, even formal, quality, in part, perhaps, because it requires both figures to reach their right arms across their bodies.

In some fifteenth-century representations of the Visitation, the illuminator appears to be depicting the handclasp at the very moment it is about to occur. The elaborate Visitation in Jean Fouquet's mid-fifteenth-century Hours of Etienne Chevalier (fig. 76) is clearly centered and focused on the movement of Mary's and Elizabeth's hands toward each other.

We noted earlier that attentive witnessing angels and the light of the Holy Spirit appear in many Visitation images, as, for instance, the shower of light pouring down in the Rohan Hours Visitation (fig. 63). In that same miniature, one angel kneels by Mary, gazing up raptly at the protagonists while four other highly animated angels watch from above. Clearly, something momentous, involving the agency of the Holy Spirit, is

occurring in these images. Two other features of the Rohan Visitation are equally revealing. Mary clasps a book whose crimson cover stands out emphatically against the deep blues, gray browns and soft pinks of the miniature. Moreover, Elizabeth is accompanied by the aged Zachariah, who clasps his bonnet in his hand, a kneeling figure, at once physically powerful and humble.

Mary frequently holds a book in Visitation illuminations, as if to illustrate the notion that she is actually carrying the Word of God. The point is very clearly made in the Berkeley Hours Visitation (fig. 74), where Mary holds up her book so that it overlaps with her swollen abdomen. In some Visitations, in fact, both Mary and Elizabeth carry books. The ca.1200 Ingeborg Psalter displays a prefatory full-page miniature that includes a Visitation, along with the Annunciation and the Nativity. In the Visitation vignette, Mary and Elizabeth each keep hold of their books while they embrace closely.<sup>508</sup> Similarly, in the Visitation miniature of a thirteenth-century Book of Hours from the Paris region, the cousins are shown standing almost frontally against a gold background, their arms around each other's shoulders, each displaying their respective books for the viewer (fig. 77). The two figures adopt a very similar pose in an early thirteenth-century clerestory apse window at Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris (fig. 78). They stand side by side, Mary holding a red book, Elizabeth a blue. Elizabeth's arm reaches over to embrace Mary's shoulder, while Mary extends her right hand towards Elizabeth in an incipient *unctio dextrarum*. A Visitation illumination from a 1420 Book of Hours by a follower of the Boucicaut Master, mentioned already for its vibrant yellow sun in an orange sky (fig. 61), shows Elizabeth holding up a thick codex bound in black

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508. Ingeborg Psalter, prefatory illumination (France, Noyon: last decade of 13th century; Musée Condé, Chantilly, MS 1695).

leather, while Mary carries a small reddish-brown volume. What is happening, quite literally, in these images, all of them Parisian in origin, is the meeting of the two Testaments, Mary's smaller Gospels and Elizabeth's voluminous Old Testament, and—as the close embrace of Mary and Elizabeth would indicate—their fusion into the one book of scriptures that governs the Church.

As Capretti noted, Augustine himself had alluded to the Visitation as a sign of the transition from the Old to the New Testaments.<sup>509</sup> Yet, while it is entirely credible that Mary, the mother of Christ, would be associated with the Gospels, in what way is Elizabeth representative, not only of the Old Testament, but specifically of the Old Testament as predecessor of the New? The answer may lie in Luke's own description of Elizabeth as "of the daughters of Aaron" and as the wife of the Jewish priest Zachariah. Zachariah's exalted status among the Jews is underlined by the fact that an angel tells him of the birth of his son within the inner sanctum of the temple, where he alone may go (Luke 1:8–22). Zachariah and Elizabeth are not only prominent within their Jewish community, they are devout followers of the law. Specifically, Luke says, "And they were both just before God, walking in all the commandments and justifications of the Lord without blame."<sup>510</sup> Thus, Elizabeth's cry of welcome—"Whence is this to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?"<sup>511</sup>—may be read as the acceptance of Christ's divinity by a descendant of Aaron and wife of the high-priest, and thus a representative of the "just" among the Jewish people. Elizabeth's words ratify, in the name of these Jews who followed the law in "Justice," the coming of Christ and the

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509. *Supra*, 2.

510. Luke 1:6.

511. Luke 1:43.

cosmic shift from the Covenant of the Law to the Covenant of Grace. The role of the Jewish priest Zachariah in Visitation iconography supports this interpretation. In many Visitation images, as in the Rohan Hours (fig. 63), Zachariah becomes a participant in the Visitation event, seconding Elizabeth's gesture of obeisance. In the Hours of Etienne Chevalier (fig. 76), he stands in quiet contemplation of the handclasp that is about to occur between Mary and Elizabeth; as in the Rohan Hours, he has removed his cap, which hangs over his shoulder. A similarly quiescent Zacharias kneels in the background of an early sixteenth-century Visitation from a Flemish Book of Hours, his prominent red cap in his hand (fig. 79).

Beginning in the sixteenth century, images of the Visitation not only make use of the *unctio dextrarum* more frequently, they are also more explicit about the role of Zachariah and the significance of the Visitation event within Christian history. Thus, in a Visitation executed for an altarpiece predella, the sixteenth-century Umbrian painter Bernardino di Mariotto dello Stagno shows Zachariah blessing Mary and Elizabeth as, with downcast eyes, they solemnly clasp hands (fig. 80). In Dürer's 1503 Visitation for his woodcut series The Life of the Virgin, engraved a few years later by Marcantonio Raimondi, Zachariah holds out his cap in both hands like an offering, as he watches Mary and Elizabeth's embrace. Clearly, Zachariah's hat has symbolic value as a representation of priestly functions that are no longer necessary. By removing his cap, Zachariah performs a gesture of obeisance by which he explicitly relinquishes the Jewish character of his priestly role, and acquiesces in the union of the scriptures and the transition from Law to Grace.

Two works visibly integrate many of the elements of what appears to have been an evolving Visitation iconography expressive of a consistent theme. The first is Pontormo's 1514–16 fresco for the atrium of Santa Annunziata in Florence (fig. 71). The work deviates from tradition in locating the event, not in a landscape, but in an architectural space in which a set of stairs lead up to an exedra. Mary and Elizabeth greet each other with the *unctio dextrarum*, located, here again, in the central axis of the painting and at the vanishing point established by the figures situated on either side of the stairs. Joseph, kneeling to Mary's right, looks over at the standing figure of Zachariah, who points up at an image of the Sacrifice of Isaac.<sup>512</sup> As if in response, Joseph gestures forcibly towards Mary with one hand, while the other, supported by his cane, points toward the Old Testament image. Joseph's twofold gesture clearly responds to Zachariah's assertion of the law of Abraham with an invocation of Christian grace embodied in Mary and the Old Testament prophetic tradition—the sacrifice of Isaac is a type of the sacrifice of Christ. Jack Wasserman identified Pontormo's fictive space as a church.<sup>513</sup> It is, rather, a Jewish temple, transforming before our eyes, through Mary and Elizabeth's sacred handclasp, into a church that is representative of Ecclesia in its totality. A second representative image is a sixteenth-century print of the Visitation by the painter and engraver Giulio Bonasone (fig. 81). In this image, Mary and Elizabeth's

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512. Jack Wasserman describes Zachariah as “blessing.” “Jacopo Pontormo's Florentine Visitation: The Iconography,” *Artibus et Historiae: An Art Anthology* 32 (1995): 39. However, from his position on the stairs it is not at all clear who Zachariah could be blessing. The pantomime of Zachariah and Joseph refers certainly to Luke's account of the muteness inflicted upon Zachariah for having doubted the angel's pronouncement that his aged wife would bear a child. Pontormo has included a further reference to Zachariah's doubt and to his punishment in the figure of a grinning handmaiden who points toward him. Zachariah's skepticism may have been equated with a clinging to the letter of the Jewish law, which is punished by his muteness and eventually overcome.

513. The exedra depicted in Pontormo's fresco originally included a semi-dome, now erased. Wasserman, “Jacopo Pontormo's Florentine Visitation,” 45.

forcible *unctio dextrarum* is, as usual, located on the central axis. Their handclasp is framed, on the left, by a statue of Moses holding the tablets of the law, and, on the right, by the figure of Zachariah, who, unlike Pontormo's more reluctant Zachariah, immediately converts to the Christian cause and vehemently pulls off his round priest's cap.

In the Santo Spirito Visitation, it is the *unctio dextrarum*, deliberately isolated, centered and highlighted, that stands virtually alone as symbol of the transition from Law to Grace and the union of the Testaments. Certain elements of the background corroborate the significance of the handclasp. For instance, we now understand why the city of Jerusalem, placed behind Mary in many Visitation miniatures, is here located behind Elizabeth. Piero's Jerusalem includes the Jewish temple with its characteristic circular shape, orientalizing cupolas and arched "Romanesque" windows. However, the low building that displays the Annunciation fresco places Mary and Gabriel to either side of a slim Gothic window. Piero appears to have made use here of the distinction, famously construed by Panofsky in northern fifteenth-century painting, between orientalizing Romanesque and Gothic architecture with their corresponding references to the Judaic and the Christian eras.<sup>514</sup> More directly, as we have seen, the spire of the Jewish temple is actually topped with a minute cross (fig. 58). At Santo Spirito, as at Santa Annunziata, the temple transforms before our eyes into a church. In both cases, the images of the *unctio dextrarum* and the merging of allusions within the temple architecture inflect the transition from Old to New Dispensation toward inclusion and unity. The Jewish temple abides, converted into a church. What the *unctio dextrarum*

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514. Panofsky, Early Netherlandish Painting, vol. 1, 136.

accomplishes here, as a pictorial representation of the unity of the scriptures, is to assert that the coming of the reign of Grace was less a transition to a new covenant than the revelation of the true purpose of the old. This view of the relationship between the two Testaments and the two Dispensations is exemplified by Paul's address in Galatians 4:21–31:

Tell me, you that desire to be under the law, have you not read the law?  
For it is written that Abraham had two sons: the one by a bondwoman, and  
the other by a free woman... Now we brethren, as Isaac was, are the  
children of promise ... we are not the children of the bondwoman, but of  
the free; by the freedom wherewith Christ has made us free.

At Santo Spirito, the theme of a union of the scriptures underlying the unity of the Church itself necessarily receives an Augustinian inflexion. As J. C. Coyle has argued extensively,<sup>515</sup> for Augustine and other patristic fathers before him, *concordia* was the essential attribute of the Holy Spirit: “In the Father unity, in the Son equality, in the Holy Spirit the harmony of unity and equality; and these three are all one because of the Father, are all equal because of the Son, are all linked together because of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>516</sup> Augustine was writing on the basis of a tradition several centuries old that saw the Holy Spirit as “the connector of any two things,”<sup>517</sup> and indeed the bonding force of the natural world. We noted already the role of the Holy Spirit in Mary, as described by Gabriel, and in Elizabeth, who at the moment of Mary's appearance and her son's agitation is “filled with the Holy Ghost.” John the Baptist himself, according to Gabriel's announcement to Zachariah, “shall be filled with the Holy Ghost, even from his mother's

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515. J. K. Coyle, “Concordia: The Holy Spirit as Bond of the Two Testaments in Augustine,” *Augustinianum* 22 (1982): 427–56. See also Eugene TeSelle, “Holy Spirit,” in Fitzgerald, *Augustine through the Ages*, 435.

516. Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, I 55, 108.

517. Marius Victorinus, cited in Coyle, “Concordia,” 446.

womb.”<sup>518</sup> Thus, at Santo Spirito, the *junctio dextrarum* that links Mary and Elizabeth is itself a depiction of the Holy Ghost at work within both women and the children they carry, as an active force of bonding and cohesion.

More specifically, Augustine, as well as other patristic writers, entreated his readers to acknowledge “the ‘*concordia*’ of both Testaments.”<sup>519</sup> It was because both the scriptures and the Gospels spoke of the same divinity, that, as Paul had expressed in Galatians 4:21–31, the very promises and aspirations expressed in the Old Testament were fulfilled in the plan of salvation—the redemption through the sacrifice of the incarnate Christ—expressed and delivered in the New. Thus, the Holy Spirit, whose essence is *concordia*, who participates in the Trinity as its Third Person and who spoke through Elizabeth and her son at the moment of the Visitation, is the same Holy Spirit who inspired the prophets of the Old Testament.<sup>520</sup> What was asserted ultimately—and specifically by Augustine—was an integral scriptural unity whose very self-binding force was accomplished by the Holy Spirit.

The fusion of Old and New Testaments through the Holy Spirit parallels and supports that Spirit’s union of all Christians who live indivisibly within the Ecclesia, the body of Christ.<sup>521</sup> Saint Augustine, calling upon Christians to keep “the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 3:4–5), saw the Church, like the Testaments,

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518. Luke 1:15.

519. “Videte testamenti utriusque concordiam.” Augustine, *De moribus ecclesiae catholicae* 18:34 (ca. 1325), cited in Coyle, “Concordia,” 428.

520. Ibid., 443.

521. Ibid., 448. As Clement of Alexandria stated in the second century, “The rule of the Church is the agreement and harmony of Law and prophets with the covenant that was to come through the Lord’s arrival.” Clement of Alexandria, *The Stromata*, VI, IS: 125, 3, cited in Coyle, “Concordia,” 437.



indissolubly united by the Holy Spirit.<sup>522</sup> The *unctio dextrarum* of Mary and Elizabeth is thus offered to the viewer as a symbol of the Holy Spirit forging the union of the scriptures on which the unity that is the Church rests. It is, to quote Augustine's De Doctrina Christiana, a "metaphorical"<sup>523</sup> or "significant sign."<sup>524</sup> At the same time, Mary's visit to Elizabeth, as recounted in the Gospel of Luke, remains an actual event within the history of Christ's incarnate presence on earth. The emergence of the Church from the union between Old and New Word, God and man and, literally, woman and woman took place historically at the Visitation. In other words, the mystery of divine presence insures that literal and spiritual meanings, the sign and its signified, are one.<sup>525</sup>

Paul's stress in Galatians 4:21–31 on unity rather than division and transition was crucial theologically and politically in the context of the emerging Christian Church.<sup>526</sup> The same notion of unity, applied to the Church and its history, remained important in the context of the Feast of the Visitation, extended to the entire Church by Urban VI precisely as a celebration of ecclesiastical unity. It is possible here again to give the painting's stress on unity a significance that is political as well as religious. The Santo Spirito friar Leonardo da Fivizzano in a public letter had harshly blamed Savonarola for

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522. TeSelle, "Holy Spirit," 436.

523. Augustine, De Doctrina Christiana, II, 10 15, 135.

524. Ibid., III, 9, 13, 175.

525. Michael Cameron's reflections on the subject of the later Augustine's approach to exegesis are surely relevant here: "As Christ in his flesh effectually offered God to the world, so sacramental signs effectually offered spiritual reality to the soul.... Where Augustine had once thought the prophetic sign acted as the diaphanous and obsolescent pointer to the future reality, Christ was now understood to have been present within the sign both to denote and to communicate his power." "The Christological Substructure of Augustine's Figurative Exegesis," in Bright, Augustine and the Bible, 96.

526. Eric Auerbach, "Figura," trans. Ralph Manheim, in Scenes from the Drama of European Literature, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 49–52.

bringing division into the city.<sup>527</sup> What was at issue as well, certainly, was concord within the Church, divided by Savonarola's claims of direct prophetic power and his rejection of papal authority. Piero's Visitation iconography with its powerful emphasis on the unity of Ecclesia reflects the response of the Hermits to the rise and fall of Savonarola. The Capponi Visitation does not simply assert the benefits of ecclesiastical concord; it constructs an argument for that concord's inviolability premised on the role of the Holy Spirit in the unification of the Testaments, a role asserted by Augustine.

### **G. The Kiss of Justice and Peace**

Paul's argument in Galatians 4:21–31 that the promise of freedom, inherited by the Jews from Abraham's free wife, was actualized by Christ is an argument by prefiguration. Because the Old and New Testaments invoke and are inspired by the same Spirit and because the promises of the Old are fulfilled in the New, the events described in the New are prefigured in the Old. Prefiguration or typology<sup>528</sup> was fundamental to Augustine's exegesis of the Old Testament: "For what is that which we call the Old Testament but a hidden form of the New? And what is that which we call the New Testament but the revelation of the Old?"<sup>529</sup> As Cameron has summarized, Augustine "spoke of the Old as 'the secret of the New,' the New in the Old 'like fruit in the root,' the grace of the New 'hidden' in the Old, and, in the famous couplet, 'the New is in the Old concealed, and the Old is in the New revealed.'"<sup>530</sup> If that is the case, is the crucial

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527. Chap. 1, 22.

528. Auerbach, "Figura," 47.

529. Augustine, *City of God*, XVI 26, 737; Auerbach, "Figura," 37–38.

530. Respectively, *On Catechizing the Uninstructed* 4.8; *Commentaries on the Psalms*, 72. 1; *Letters* 140.3. 6; and *Questions on the Heptateuch* 2.73, cited in Cameron, "Christological Substructure," 87.

event of the Visitation, which asserts itself the *concordia* of the scriptures, the fulfillment of an Old Testament *figura*?<sup>531</sup>

In the vast majority of medieval Psalters and Books of Hours, the Visitation was associated with the Magnificat, which occupied the liturgical hour of Lauds, and thus was linked to Psalm 69:5: “Let all that seek thee rejoice and be glad in thee; and let such as love thy salvation say always: The Lord be magnified.” Byzantine Psalters, on the other hand, commonly linked the Visitation to verse 11 of Psalm 84: “Mercy and truth have met each other: justice and peace have kissed.”<sup>532</sup> Although this typology may have been particularly popular in the East, it does appear in the West as well. The original twelfth-century typological window of Canterbury Cathedral choir, now lost, included a central Visitation medallion and two flanking half-medallions, one representing the embrace of Mercy and Truth, the other the kiss of Justice and Peace.<sup>533</sup> Similarly, the ninth-century Parisian Stuttgart Psalter illustrates verse 11 of Psalm 85—“iustitia et pax oscultate sunt”—with the image of Elizabeth and Mary, depicted as representations of Justice and

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531. The issue is discussed in Schiller, Ikonographie der christlichen Kunst, 235; Elena M. Calvillo, “Imitation and Invention in the Service of Rome: Giulio Clovio’s Works for Cardinals Marino Grimani and Alessandro Faroese” (PhD diss., John Hopkins University, 2003), 327–32.

532. Examples include the ninth-century Pantokrator Marginal Psalter (Mount Athos Monastery, Pantokrator, Ms. 61), fol. 118v; the ninth-century Chludoff Psalter (Moscow: Historical Museum, gr. 129), fol. 85r; the 1066 Theodore Psalter (London: British Library, Add. 19352), fol. 113 v.; the Barberini Psalter, dating from the second half of the eleventh century (Rome: Biblioteca Vaticana, Barb. Gr. 372), fol. 146v; and the late thirteenth- to early fourteenth-century Hamilton Greek Psalter (Berlin: Staatliche Museen, Kupferstichkabinett, 78.A.9), fol. 161r.

533. That the relationship between the allegories of the virtues mentioned in the psalm and the scene of the Visitation was intended to be typological is confirmed by the alignment above of the Annunciation medallion with its type, the scenes of Moses and the Burning Bush. The typological subjects of the lost north aisle window were reconstructed based on three manuscripts: Canterbury, Chapter Archives, Roll C. 246 (fourteenth century); Cambridge, Library, Corpus Christi College, 400 (late thirteenth century); and Oxford, Corpus Christi Library, 256 (by William Glastynbury, monk of Christ Church, fifteenth century). *Corpus Vitrearum Medii Aevi*, Great Britain, 2, Christ Church, Canterbury (1981), 83–85; fig. 147 (diagram); Calvillo, “Imitation and Invention,” 331 n. 219.

Peace, closely embracing.<sup>534</sup> Particularly enlightening is a 1470–80 French Book of Hours illuminated by a certain Maître Francois. The book includes two separate representations of the Visitation. The image for the hour of Lauds is conventionally set within a landscape, although it appears to lay particular emphasis on the theological and spiritual importance of the biblical event: instead of embracing Mary, Elizabeth folds her hands in prayer, while a trio of angels sings in a bas-de-page image below (fig. 82). However, the book's miniature for the hour of Matins, while it includes the Annunciation scene customary for that hour, is mainly devoted to what appears to be another Visitation (fig. 65): the figures of Mary and Elizabeth, standing quietly against a starlit sky, clasp both of each other's hands in a two-handed variant of the *unctio dextrarum*. Beside them, a second female pair kiss, arms on each other's shoulders. The figure on the left, who wears partial armor and carries a sword in her right hand, clearly represents the virtue of Justice; the woman on the right must be Pax, and indeed she carries an object inscribed with three letters of which the middle one is a legible Gothic *a*. The illumination thus places the Visitation and its type or *figura*, the kiss of Justice and Peace, side by side. As in the Stuttgart Psalter, the typological connection specifically links Elizabeth with Justice, since both are placed on the left of their respective pairs, while Mary, standing to the right of her cousin, must be associated with the figure of Peace.

In 1546, Giulio Clovio, working for Cardinal Farnese in Rome, made a similarly explicit use of Psalm 85:10 as *figura* of the Visitation in his Farnese Hours. The Farnese Hours is a lushly decorated typological Book of Hours in which illustrations of episodes in the life of Christ and the Virgin appropriate to the liturgical hours are juxtaposed, on

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534. Stuttgart Psalter, ca. 820–830 (Stuttgart: Landesbibliothek, Bib1.fo1. 23), fo1. 100v.

the facing page, with their Old Testament prefigurations. Here again, while the Visitation marks the hour of Lauds, it is paired with the embrace of Peace and Justice (fig. 83). The aged Elizabeth and Mary, on the left page, and Justice and Peace, on the right, greet each other with a prominent display of the two-handed *unctio dextrarum*.<sup>535</sup> A grisaille cameo of the marriage of the Virgin, inserted into the miniature's frame below the principal image, also clearly features the *unctio dextrarum*, located on the same axis as the handclasp of the allegorical figures above it. The purpose of the cameo may be to remind us of that symbol's original significance.<sup>536</sup> In Clovio's Hours, as in the fifteenth-century French Hours illustrated by Maître Francois, it is made clear that Elizabeth prefigures Justice and Mary prefigures Peace by the parallel positions of the figures and the similar delicate pastels of Mary and Peace's garments. Clovio's depiction of the Visitation proper shows us Elizabeth emerging from her house, followed closely by a respectful Zachariah, his hat in hand, while the landscape background includes a circular building that represents probably the temple of Jerusalem, since it is bereft of classical ornament. On the opposing page, behind the figures of Justice and Peace, stands the temple's pendant, a circular building in a classical vein topped with a statue that appears to be wearing a halo. That statue and the central axis of the temple as a whole are situated themselves on the same axis as the clasped hands of the allegorical pair. Thus, Clovio's illuminations gather together the various ingredients of Visitation iconography as it

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535. Because of the paucity of precedents, the literature on Clovio's Visitation miniatures has only recently acknowledged the typology of Psalm 84:11. See Calvillo, "Imitation and Invention," 330–331; Mary Jeanette Cerney, "The Farnese Hours: A Sixteenth Century Mirror" (PhD diss., Ohio State University, 1984), 84–85.

536. A pendant grisaille cameo below the Visitation scene proper represents the Virgin's presentation to the temple. In what may be an *invenzione* of Clovio's, the young Virgin extends her arm as she climbs the temple steps, presumably to grasp the hand of the temple priest—probably Zachariah—who also extends his hand towards her, another intimation of the *unctio dextrarum*.

developed through the Western Middle Ages: the foretold kiss of Justice and Peace occurs at the union of Elizabeth and Mary, who embody respectively the Old Testament and the New. That union itself signals the inclusion of the Old within the New and the birth of the unified Church that is Christ. The association of Elizabeth with the virtue of Justice appears appropriate in light of Luke's use of the word *iusti* to describe both Zaccariah and his wife in Luke 1:6: "And they were both just before God, walking in all the commandments and justifications of the Lord without blame." Justice here encompasses both rectitude of conduct and, significantly, obedience to the commandments of the Jewish law. The figure of Justice, at once allegory and prefiguration, thus connects Elizabeth to the Old Dispensation while signaling her worthiness for the new. In the words of Isaiah, "Justice will bring about Peace."<sup>537</sup> Peace, a gift of God,<sup>538</sup> is identified by Augustine, as we have seen, with the Holy Spirit that binds the scriptures into one: "The soul's salvation and the way to happiness are shown by the peace (*pax*) of both scriptures."<sup>539</sup> Mary, as the figure of Peace and of the New Testament, brings herself to Justice—the Old Testament—so that, because she is Peace and thus the bonding power of the Holy Spirit, Old and New may dwell together in the Peace of the Church. The presence of Peace through Mary at the Visitation thus affirms the core values of reconciliation and union already suggested by the *junctio dextrarum* and asserted by the prayer at the Mass for the Feast of the Visitation.

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537. Isa. 32:17.

538. Augustine, *City of God*, XV. 4, 639.

539. Augustine, *De moribus ecclesiae catholicae*, 18:43, cited in Coyle, "Concordia," 451.

To what extent, however, can we be certain that the Santo Spirito Visitation, as painted by Piero under the guidance of the friars, refers specifically to the embrace of Justice and Peace?<sup>540</sup> That embrace, described in verse 11 of Psalm 85, differs from standard Old Testament typology in that it does not describe an event that belongs to the history of the Jewish people as an antecedent of a New Testament event, but to a vision of an allegorical event that will happen in the future. The identification of that vision as a type of the Visitation implies that, at the Visitation itself, Peace and Justice actually embraced. Thus, if the Santo Spirito Visitation does refer to the kiss of Peace and Justice, then it depicts not only Mary and Elizabeth but also, in their guise, Peace and Justice, solemnly linked, and the inauguration of a new era in which the just will meet with Peace.

Arguably, the particularities of Piero's depiction of Mary and Elizabeth—the isolation of both women, the absence of movement<sup>541</sup> and, largely, of ornament for the sake of clarity and monumentality—are pictorial strategies that allowed Piero to represent without violating standards of naturalistic decorum two actual persons who are at the same time allegorical figures.<sup>542</sup> The absence of any evidence of pregnancy in either woman, or any expression, on Elizabeth's part, specifically directed at Mary's pregnancy,

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540. Both the Santo Spirito friars and the members of the Capponi family would have been aware of the liturgical correspondences within the painting. The season of Advent, which celebrates Christ's coming, begins with the Feast of Saint Nicholas on December 8; it includes the Feast of the Nativity on December 24 and the Feast of the Innocents on December 28 as well as the Feast of the Epiphany on January 6. The Communion of the Mass for the first Sunday of Advent includes a verse from Psalm 84.

541. Piero has in fact been criticized for the relatively inert attitudes of his Elizabeth and Mary in contrast with his preliminary sketch (fig. 50a) in which the same figures exhibit "energy and a sense of psychological urgency." Geronimus, Piero di Cosimo, 203.

542. The portrayal of a specific constellation of human values by means of an identified female figure is of course a central endeavor of Botticelli's Bardi altarpiece, as of his Primavera (Dempsey, Portrayal of Love). Arguably that rhetorical strategy was an inseparable aspect of the portraiture of women in fifteenth-century Florence (Brown, Virtue and Beauty).

would also be appropriate to an allegorical portrayal of Peace and Justice.<sup>543</sup> The three “Visitation” couples painted by Maître Francois suggest a similar transition between the depiction of an individual and creation of an allegory. In the Visitation illumination proper assigned to the hour of Lauds (fig. 82), both women are visibly pregnant and, while their own attitudes are somewhat reserved, Elizabeth’s maid engages in astonished and excited gestures. In the Matins folio (fig. 65), Mary and Elizabeth resemble their counterparts in the Lauds illumination by their contemporary clothing and their marked difference in age. However, their gestures and the bright colors of Mary’s garments are more subdued, and their pregnancies are concealed by the drapery folds of their mantles. Finally, in the third rendition of the encounter, the allegorical figures proper appear to be the same age, are clearly not pregnant and carry the appropriate attributes. Piero’s elegant and powerful figures, abstracted by their isolation and the ovoid geometry of their clothing, appear, like the intermediary figures of Maître Francois’ Matins illumination, to be located somewhere halfway between individual and allegory.<sup>544</sup>

As we have seen, Augustine’s own use of typology in his exegesis of the Old Testament was fundamental to the method’s broad acceptance throughout the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance. It is Augustine, as well, who promoted the reading of the Psalms, presumably authored by David, as an expression of the Incarnation and the Passion of Christ. In turn, Augustinian Hermits, such as Giles of Viterbo in the sixteenth

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543. The accoutrements of Justice, her sword and cuirass, belonged to a well-established iconography, as is clear from Maître Francois’ and Giulio Clovio’s illuminations, as from the 1460 figure of Justice painted by Piero del Pollaiuolo for the Mercanzia. Piero’s requirement, however, was to represent Justice in the guise of Elizabeth.

544. The reference to Peace and Justice, as well as to the union of scriptures and Church, is even more explicit in Albertinelli’s composition in which Mary and Elizabeth grasp each other’s right hands while they lean forward to kiss.



century, broadened and solidified Augustine's typological reading of the Psalms.<sup>545</sup> We have already mentioned a sermon delivered by Mariano da Genazzano in which the preacher read Psalm 21 as a depiction of Christ's Crucifixion and deemed it equal, as a testimony of the truth, to the description set forth in the Gospels. "Nothing, indeed, resembles another thing, is as equal to something else, as the oracles of our prophet concord with these of the evangelists. Their kinship, indeed, of their circumstances and their words is perfect." Mariano comes close to arguing here for a radical scriptural unity, which ultimately telescopes human time and voids history.<sup>546</sup>

The friars of Santo Spirito would have been particularly susceptible to reading the Visitation as the fulfillment of the promised embrace of Peace and Justice because Augustine's own Sermon on Psalm 84 includes the terms *visitatio* and *visitare*, understood as the visiting of the human soul by God, a usage that is otherwise extremely rare in Augustine.<sup>547</sup> The parallels between Psalm 84 itself and the Santo Spirito Visitation are evident. The subject of Psalm 84 is the coming of divine redemption expressed in terms of the land's renewal—"Lord thou hast blessed thy land ... For the Lord will give goodness and our earth shall yield her fruit" (v. 2, 13)—and in terms of the soul's inner receptivity to God rewarded by the gift of Peace—"I will hear what the Lord God will speak in me: for he will speak peace unto his people. And unto his saints: and unto them that are converted to the heart" (v. 9). Indeed, we noted earlier that the

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545. Deramaix, "Fra Mariano contre Savonarole," 184.

546. Mariano da Gennazano, De passione Jesu Christi, 192.

547. Augustine, "Psalm LXXXIV" 12, 13, in Expositions on the Book of Psalms, vol. 1, trans. A. Cleveland Coxe, in Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, vol. 8 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 409.

painting's desert wilderness recalls the landscape of the Psalms, in which the desert serves as trope for the individual soul thirsty for God.

Augustine's *enarratio* of Psalm 84 reinterprets its vision of a coming era of redemption in terms of the transition from the Old to the New Dispensation, an issue that is, of course, highly relevant to the Visitation as the moment in which that transition occurs. The psalmist's claims of present redemption in verse 2—"Thou hast blessed thy land; thou hast turned away the captivity of Jacob"—and his prayers for divine solace are read by Augustine as prophetic adumbrations of divine mercy proffered on the generations that follow the coming of Christ: "The first generation was mortal by thy wrath; the second generation shall be immortal by thy Mercy."<sup>548</sup>

Augustine's self-described movement from a literal Jewish to a "spiritual" reading premised on the New Dispensation functions as well as a transition from a tale of the collective history of a nation to an evocation of personal struggle against sin and alienation in the hope of divine "visitation." In "Covering," as stated in the psalm, verse 3, or "overlooking," in Augustine's words, our sins, Christ has brought "us to life and ... people shall rejoice..." This rejoicing involves the recognition of our reliance for true value upon God, analogized, as in Piero's Visitation, to that least material and most essential res, light: "Rejoice in that light which hath no setting: rejoice in that dawn which no yesterday precedes, which no tomorrow follows. What light is that? 'I,' said he, 'am the Light of the world'."

In the psalm, as in Augustine's exegesis, the attainment of peace is an inner experience, contiguous with the experience of Christ's presence within, his visitation.

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548. Likewise, Augustine's gloss of v. 10—"Mercy and Truth have met together"—juxtaposes the Jewish "Truth" with the "Mercy" shown by the Redeemer to all (9).

Augustine interprets verse 9, “I will hearken what the Lord God speaketh in me,” as an exercise in inner contemplation through which each of us may hear Christ’s voice offering peace. However, the unjust soul will be unable to receive the Peace of Christ, which is the reward of Justice. “Do Justice,” Augustine interprets, “and thou shalt have peace ... For if you love not Justice, thou shalt not have peace ... that he who hath done Justice may find peace kissing Justice.” Referring to verse 14 of the psalm—“For Justice shall go before him and he shall direct his steps in the way,”<sup>549</sup> Augustine interprets: “Let that Justice go before, of confession of sins: He will come and visit thee, for now He hath where to place his steps”. Thus, in Augustine’s exegesis, as in both the psalm and the Santo Spirito altarpiece, we are led through self-examination to the repentance that prepares for the visit of God.

In his concluding paragraphs, Augustine elaborates on the role of Justice as the groundwork for the Lord’s visit, employing the trope of the barren land, rendered fertile by Christ’s presence. Verse 13 of the psalm—“For the Lord will give goodness: and our earth shall yield her fruit”—is interpreted spiritually to apply to the human soul, plowed by confession of sins, seeded by Augustine’s own words and waiting for “the rain of God.” “Think now upon the word which ye have heard, like those who break up the clouds, lest the fowls should carry away the seed. And unless God rain upon it, what profits it that it is sown? This is what is meant by ‘our land shall give her increase.’” It is at that point that Augustine speaks of God’s “visitations of the heart”: “May he with his visitations, in leisure, in business, in your house, in your bed, at meal-time, in

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549. “For this is the beginning of man’s righteousness, that thou shouldest punish thyself, who art evil, and God should make thee good.(13)” The admission of sins followed by repentance and punishment are “a way for God, that God may come unto thee.(13)”

conversation, in walks, visit your hearts, when we are not by.” He concludes, “May the rain of God come and make to sprout what is sown there.”

The overlapping concerns of Augustine’s exegesis and of Piero’s altarpiece include the promises of God’s redeeming presence and his offer of Peace, interpreted historically as the union of Christ’s Mercy with the Truth of Jewish law and spiritually as the “confession of sins” and the just life that opens the heart to God’s visitation. The saint’s endeavors to encourage in the listener the self-examination and self-castigation that free the soul for the visitations of God parallel the preoccupation evidenced by the altarpiece—in image and text—with meditative self-confrontation and the presence of God’s voice within. As we have seen, the fruitfulness of the land, understood as an image of salvation, is captured in Piero’s painting by the greening that follows Mary’s footsteps, the flourishing tree that inclines toward her and the painting’s rain cloud headed toward the parched desert behind the central figures. The presence of the Divinity through the Holy Spirit is portrayed in the intense light that bathes the image, in the gift of Peace accomplished through Mary and in the rain cloud that brings life to the dry land. Indeed, the coming rain is heralded by the flocks of birds to which Augustine alludes in his *enarratio*. The *junctio dextrarum*, centered and magnified in Piero’s painting by a variety of visual pointers, asserts the end of the law at the moment of its inclusion in Christ, the Word of the scriptures. As Mary and Elizabeth join hands, the temple of Jerusalem is topped with a cross that points up to the monastery on the hill. The peace between Mary and Elizabeth is the Peace of the scriptures, the Peace of the one Church and the Peace offered by Christ to the soul.

Many of the issues of concern to Piero's advisors merge in the figure of Elizabeth. As we discussed earlier, her clothing, as well as her demeanor, suggests that she is very probably portrayed as a lay member of an Augustinian female community, and thus is broadly representative of the Augustinian order. Importantly, her hunched shoulders and gently raised hand testify not only to age but also to her humility. As she looks at Mary, Elizabeth's sallow, finely wrinkled face is illuminated by tenderness and awe. That illumination itself, of course, is significant, the work of the Holy Spirit. As Augustine prescribes in his *enarratio*, she "hearkens to what God says within her" and speaks out under the impulse of the Holy Spirit. Visited by God in Mary's womb, she is the one "who loves justice" as described in Nicholas's book of Wisdom. Christ's Visitation, through Mary and through the agency of the Spirit, brings to Elizabeth the Peace that is the reward of Justice. In the figure of Elizabeth, Piero's painting thus assimilates the historical fact of the Visitation both with the path to Wisdom set out in Nicholas's book and with the spiritual meaning derived by Augustine from the allegorical *figura* of Psalm 84, the meeting of Peace and Justice.

Elizabeth thus exemplifies the Christian life as preparation for the visitations of Peace and for the ultimate reign of Peace to come and confirms the extended power of the Spirit, accomplished and enacted by the *unctio dextrarum*, as *concordia* not only between Old and New Testament and Old and New Dispensation, but also between God and the Christian soul. Dressed in dark earth brown—the color of plowed fields—she receives the Visitation of the Mother of God in celestial blue, while behind her the desert expects the coming rain. At the same time, Elizabeth's readiness for Mary's visit alludes to and parallels the role of the son she is carrying in the narrative of Christ's Incarnation.

As Augustine reminds us in his *enarratio* on Psalm 84, John the Baptist is the forerunner who calls out: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his path straight.”<sup>550</sup> Elizabeth’s faith, in the words of Psalm 84:14, “walks before” the Lord, so that he may “set his steps in the way.” Here again, a constellation of spiritual meanings involving a practice of personal self-correction and devotion is merged with and embodied in the truth of Christ’s story on earth, his own Visitation. In this exploration of the Santo Spirito Visitation we have foregrounded the thoughts and feelings of the fifteenth-century beholder who belonged to the community of the Augustinian Hermit friars at Santo Spirito. While Anthony represents the origins of the Augustinian order, it is Elizabeth, arguably, who portrays its ideal, present and active at Santo Spirito.

As we have seen, Jordan of Quedlinburg, in his Liber Vitasfratrum, claimed that “spiritual knowledge,” attained through divine illumination and equated with the gift of knowledge granted by the Holy Spirit, depended upon the prior acquisition of ethical values: “purity of heart, humility of mind, piety of prayer and fecundity of works.”<sup>551</sup> “For it is impossible,” Jordan argued, “that an impure mind can acquire the gift of spiritual knowledge.”<sup>552</sup> We are very close here to the language of Nicholas’s book of Wisdom, which itself accords with the predispositions of the Augustinian Hermits toward a theology of “affections and praxis.”<sup>553</sup> The language of Luke speaks of Elizabeth in

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550. Matt. 3:3; Augustine, Expositions, 409. 13.

551. Supra, 34 n. 67; 51 n. 96. Saak, High Way to Heaven, 360–61.

552. Jordan of Quedlinburg, Liber Vitasfratrum, 2, 23 (242, 4–245–80), cited in Saak, High Way to Heaven, 360. Saak specifies that Jordan’s language here derives explicitly from Cassian; it belongs, in other words, to a longstanding monastic tradition centered on the restoration of the soul’s likeness to God through purity of heart and charity. McGinn, Foundations of Mysticism, 219.

553. Saak, High Way to Heaven, 363. According to Giles of Rome, “Theology cannot be properly said to be speculative or practical, rather it is affective.” Sententiae, Prol. 4 (ed. Venice, 1521), fol. 8t, cited in Saak, High Way to Heaven, 365.

terms of Justice, understood as fundamental adherence to the will of God. However, the Wisdom text held by Nicholas and Piero's own representation of Elizabeth, which stresses her humility and gentleness of spirit, expand that adherence to encompass virtues of "goodness and simplicity of heart." Elizabeth thus functions within the painting as an exemplar of a particularly Augustinian effort at affective responsiveness and focused praxis. Ultimately, Anthony's unreadable letter, displayed below Elizabeth's illumined face, may tell us that the study of scripture—and the study of Piero's Visitation as well—will not communicate God to us, without a mode of reading that is, as well, a mode of living and feeling, as modeled for us and the friars of Santo Spirito by Anthony and Elizabeth.<sup>554</sup>

The transition from the Dispensation of the Law to the Dispensation of Christ, one of the subjects of concern to the Santo Spirito Visitation, plays a paradigmatic role in the historiography of the history of art. It is that same preoccupation with the passage from the Old to the New Dispensation that Panofsky "discovered" in the architectural shifts of Melchior Broederlam's Annunciation.<sup>555</sup> Panofsky attributed no iconographic significance to the Visitation set in a wild and mountainous landscape to the right of the Annunciation. Yet, the development of Visitation iconography, discussed in this chapter, suggests that Broederlam's Visitation, as well as his Annunciation, referred the beholder to the same moment of Christian history when the Law gave way to Grace.

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554. Quoting the *De Doctrina Christiana*—"He saw fit to become our road" (182–83)—Sarah Spence argues that the discipline of elucidating the scriptures is itself the experience of finding Christ, "the process of moving toward God, and as such it is exactly parallel to Augustine's understanding of Christ, who is both the end of the road and the road itself." *Rhetorics of Reason and Desire: Vergil, Augustine, and the Troubadours* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 96–97.

555. Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting*, 131–32, fig. 104.

At the same time, as we noted initially, more recent currents in art history have undermined the notion of a one-to-one correspondence between a theological doctrine and its pictorial rendition.<sup>556</sup> The Santo Spirito Visitation with its multiplicity of compositional devices, shifting rhetorical stances and dynamic engagement of the beholder is far more than a pictorial assertion of scriptural and ecclesiastical unity or an illustration of Psalm 84 and its Augustinian interpretation. Indeed, Visitation images generally are never univalent renditions of a historical scheme. They resonate to the tensions among the multiple values that underlie such a scheme and the broader and more fluid values that the scheme implies. In so doing they affect what is perceived, understood and felt by a spectrum of audiences. Arguably, these Visitation images that, like Piero's altarpiece, celebrate the unity of the scriptures within the authority of the undivided Church, negotiate between the values of hegemony and unity, intimating as well a sphere of reference that has to do with interiority and with intimacy of contact between Christian and Christian and God and humankind. The core fact that the Visitation takes place between two women, their fluid and porous bodies embracing yet concealing their treasure within, projects its own intimations of Divinity as gift, fusion and interior presence. The Santo Spirito Visitation isolates the clasped hands of Mary and Elizabeth, which then present themselves to the viewer as the perpetual coming into being, under the binding force of the Holy Spirit, of a constellation of unions, that of Mary and Elizabeth, of the Old and the New Testaments, of Peace and Justice, of God and the Christian soul, of all Christian souls in the wider unity of the Church. The

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556. Cassidy, "Introduction,: Iconography, Texts, and Audiences,"; Jeffrey F. Hamburger, "The Place of Theology in Medieval Art History: Problems, Positions, Possibilities," in The Mind's Eye: Art and Theological Argument in the Middle Ages, eds. Jeffrey E. Hamburger and Anne-Marie Bouché (Princeton University Press, 2006), 11–31.



creators of the altarpiece assumed a multiplicity of viewers, including the chapel patrons, the Capponi whose patron saint is seated to the Virgin's right. Yet the substantive and stylistic integration of Saints Nicholas, Anthony and Elizabeth into the life of the convent, the dynamic and assertively didactic nature of the background landscape and cityscape, the elaborate iconographic and typological architecture that supports the handclasp of Mary and Elizabeth and the contemporary political implications of that architecture, all indicate that the work's privileged beholder was an Augustinian Hermit friar from the convent of Santo Spirito. It is clear, as well, that Piero di Cosimo worked within an elaborate and dense conceptual infrastructure probably devised by one or several of the Santo Spirito Masters of Theology, quite possibly these same Masters who conceived the equally sophisticated intellectual framework of the Bardi altarpiece.

#### IV. *Caritas* and Family at Santo Spirito: Filippino Lippi's Nerli Altarpiece

Filippino Lippi's Madonna and Child with Saint Martin of Tours, the Young John the Baptist, Catherine of Alexandria and Two Donors remains in situ in the Nerli chapel, located in the right transept of Santo Spirito (fig. 5). Like the Nasi family, whose chapel separates that of the Nerli from the Capponi chapel of Saint Nicholas, the Nerli were linked to the Capponi by marriage. The composition of the Nerli altarpiece recalls Botticelli's Bardi altarpiece and the several Carbonelli *sacre conversazione* in the left transept of Santo Spirito in displaying an enthroned Madonna and Child flanked by standing saints. The panel departs from these precedents in including a third saint, the young John the Baptist, as well as the foreground figures of the donor Tanai de Nerli and his wife. Moreover, the panel's background cityscape recalls in its breadth and wealth of detail the setting of Piero di Cosimo's Visitation. As I will discuss in greater detail below, Filippino Lippi is now generally believed to have executed the work shortly after his return from Rome in 1493, where he had won acclaim for his conceptually and technically bold frescoes for Cardinal Carafa's chapel at Santa Maria sopra Minerva and expanded his repertoire of antique motifs. Very much in demand in Florence, till his death in 1504, he was considered, according to Jonathan Katz Nelson, something of "a specialist in the orchestration of complex creations, rich in exotic elements and unusual combinations."<sup>557</sup>

This altarpiece's complex iconography, which has not yet received a sustained analysis, very likely derived from a confluence of interests on the part of the Augustinian

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<sup>557</sup> Nelson, "Gli stili nelle opera tarde: interpretazioni rinascimentali e moderne," in Zembrano and Nelson, Filippino Lippi, 391-416, 391.

friars of Santo Spirito, the altarpiece's lay patron, and the artist charged with inventing the pictorial language that would give these interests their joint expression. The outcome is a depiction of *caritas*, understood in Augustinian terms as both a quality of the Godhead, an aspect of the personhood of Christ and a way of living in Christ—in fact a definition of the very process of Christian living—for monastic and layman alike. The value of *caritas* as portrayed in the painting embraces Christ's self-sacrifice on behalf of humanity, Saint Martin's gift of half his cloak to a beggar, a father of the Nerli clan bending down to kiss his child, and Tanai de Nerli's display of emotion upon the news of his wife's salvation. The quattrocento Florentine preoccupation with happiness in marriage and with the honor conferred—or, alternately, endangered—by marriage finds here a sensitive and sophisticated expression. At the same time, Filippino's treatment of charity is dependent upon an Augustinian understanding of human existence as the struggle of the City of God within the City of Man and of love as the elemental ingredient of the bond between God and man and of the ethos that underlies the Christian life.

The character and scope of the concerns expressed in the altarpiece's iconography is most clearly revealed when that altarpiece is studied in conjunction with the Nerli chapel window above it, a window whose stained-glass image was also designed by Filippino. At Santo Spirito today, the few chapels that have preserved their original windows have lost their original altarpieces. As a result, it is difficult to appreciate the visual unity that must have bound the altarpiece and the stained-glass window when both were the objects of the same commission, particularly in cases where the window was designed by the artist responsible for the altarpiece. In the case of the Nerli chapel,

however, a drawing by Filippino for the window is preserved at the Uffizi (fig. 84).<sup>558</sup> In terms of the aesthetics of the chapel as a whole, the elaborately classicizing frame included within the window design and the likely colors of the stained glass must have equaled in lavish brilliance the dense surface of the altarpiece panel and the magnificence of its gilt frame (fig. 84).<sup>559</sup> Iconographically, this design, which represents the episode of the life of Saint Martin in which the saint cuts his cloak to offer part of it to the beggar, displays for the benefit of the visitor the chapel's dedication to Saint Martin, a fact that is central to the rhetoric of charity asserted by the altarpiece.

### A. Background

The presence of the altarpiece in its chapel at Santo Spirito is mentioned by all the relevant authoritative sources, among others the Libro di Antonio Billi, which refers as well to the chapel's stained-glass window,<sup>560</sup> and the Anonimo Magliabechiano, who notes the characterization *al naturale* of the donor Tanai.<sup>561</sup> The altarpiece's lavishly ornate gilt frame, also original, has been attributed to Clemente del Tasso on a design by Filippino.<sup>562</sup> The predella is inscribed with the text of the prayer—"Virgo Dei Genitrix Intercede Pro Nostra Omnium Que Salute"—between the Nerli arms on the left, below

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558. Gabinetto Disegnie e Stampe degli Uffizi, Florence, 1169 E.

559. Figure 3, which superimposes Filippino's window design on the window frame, is an attempt to suggest something of the significant continuities between altarpiece and window within the Nerli chapel as well as the sheer impact the window would have made on the visitor to the chapel.

3. Il Libro di Antonio Billi esistente in due copie nella Biblioteca Nazionale di Firenze, before 1530, ed. Carl Frey (Berlin, 1892), 50.

561. Il Codice Magliabechiano, cl. XVII. 17 contenente notizie sopra l'arte degli antichi e quella de' Fiorentini da Cimabue a Michelangelo Buonarroti scritte da Anonimo Fiorentino, ca. 1537–42, ed. Carl Frey (Berlin: G. Grote'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1892), 116; Vasari, Lives of the Painters, 1: 566.

562. Alessandro Cecchi, "Giuliano e Benedetto da Maiano ai servigi della Signoria fiorentina," in Giuliano e la bottega dei Da Maiano: Atti del Convegno Internazionale di studi, Fiesole 13-14 giugno 1991, ed. Daniella Lamberini, Marcello Lotti, and Robert Lunardi (Florence, 1994), 152.

the kneeling figure of the donor, and the Capponi arms on the right underneath the figure of his wife. The altarpiece's date has long been a subject of dispute. Earlier scholars gave it a time frame in the mid to late 1480s based on the known dates of other works in Santo Spirito, such as the 1482 Bardi altarpiece, on the perceived conservatism of Filippino's composition and on his relative lack of freedom in the use of ornament.<sup>563</sup> Bernard Berenson, however, argued that Filippino's direct use of antique Roman sources demonstrated that the artist could only have executed the panel upon his return to Florence in 1493, following his years of work on the Carafa chapel at Santa Maria sopra Minerva in Rome.<sup>564</sup> More recently, Jane Bridgeman suggested a significantly later date of 1495 or 1496 based on the specifics of her iconographic interpretation of the painting.<sup>565</sup> Documents found by Nelson give us a reliable date of 1493 for Tanai de Nerli's purchase of the chapel and would thus appear to posit a *terminus post quem* of 1493 for the commission of the altarpiece.<sup>566</sup> In turn, arguments for an earlier date, based on Filippino's stylistic restraint in the execution of the panel, have been countered by Bridgeman's suggestion that the requirements of altarpiece uniformity at Santo Spirito tempered the exuberance of his later style.<sup>567</sup> In any case, the certain *terminus pre quem*

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563. Urbain Mengin, *Les deux Lippis* (Paris: Edition Librairie Plon, 1932) (suggesting a date of 1485); Alfred Scharf, *Filippino Lippi* (Vienna: Anton Schroll, 1935), 32, 37, 40, 56–57, 109 n. 41 (ca. 1488); Katherine B. Neilson, *Filippo Lippi: A Critical Study* (Cambridge, MA, 1938), 70 (ca. 1487); Luciano Berti and Umberto Baldini, *Filippino Lippi*, 2nd ed. (Florence: Edizione d'arte il fiorino, 1991), 66, 193–94 (ca. 1488).

564. Bernard Berenson, *Italian Pictures of the Renaissance: A List of the Principal Artists and Their Works, with an Index of Places: Florentine School*, 2 vols. (London: Phaidon Press, 1963), 109.

565. Jane Bridgeman, "Filippino Lippi's Nerli Altarpiece—A New Date," *The Burlington Magazine* 130 (1988): 668–71.

566. ASF, CSGF 122 n. 128, c. 68r. Jonathan Katz Nelson, "Aggiunte alla cronologia de Filippino Lippi," *Rivista d'arte* 43 (4th ser., vol. 7): 33–57.

date for the altarpiece must be 1498, the date of Tanai de Nerli's death.<sup>568</sup> The Louvre retains a vivid profile sketch of Tanai, clearly a preparatory drawing for the altarpiece executed by Filippino while the patron was alive.<sup>569</sup>

### 1. The Patron

Tanai de Nerli, like Giovanni de Bardi, was the wealthy descendant of an ancient patrician Florentine clan that resided originally in the San Frediano district of the Oltrarno. They counted among these magnate families whose control of the political system and perpetual internecine conflicts drew, by the mid-thirteenth century, the concerted opposition of the middle classes. By the 1290s the *primo popolo* had promulgated and enforced ordinances that excluded the magnates from all senior offices in the commune. By the late fourteenth century, the Nerli had been exiled from Florence. Tanai himself was born in 1427 near Beaucaire in the south of France, where the family seems to have owned extensive properties, and where Tanai's father, Francesco, played a significant role at the court of Rene of Anjou.<sup>570</sup> In 1435, Cosimo de' Medici allowed the Nerli to return to Florence, thus ensuring himself the support of a wealthy Oltrarno

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567. Bridgeman, "Filippino Lippi's Nerli Altarpiece," 671. However, Alessandro Cecchi argues that the panel and the window design could have been executed during a Florentine interruption in Filippino's work in the Carafa chapel in 1489–90. George R. Goldner and Carmen C. Bambach, eds., The Drawings of Filippino Lippi and His Circle, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1998), 247.

568. Although Nelson's documentary discovery now suggests a date in the early to mid-1490s for the Nerli altarpiece, it still seems that Filippino's work must antedate Piero di Cosimo's Visitation, if that panel's *terminus post quem* of 1497, discussed in the previous chapter, is accurate. If that is the case, any resemblance between the two altarpieces—most obviously, the conjunction of monumental foreground figures with a vast, multilayered and richly populated background—would reflect the influence of Filippino's *invenzione* on Piero. Jill Burke's research on the size of the Santo Spirito altarpieces points to, on the whole, an increase in panel size over time. Fittingly, the Nerli panel measures 160 by 180 cm, while the Capponi Visitation measures 184 by 189 cm.

569. Département des Arts Graphiques du Musée du Louvre, Paris 2690. Goldner and Bambach, Drawings of Filippino Lippi, 249.

570. Eugenio Gamurrini, "Famiglia de' Nerli" in Istoria Genealogica delle Famiglie Nobili Toscane, et Umbre (1679; repr., Bologna, 1972), 5:17, 26.

family with a prestigious name.<sup>571</sup> Tanai himself appears to have belonged to Lorenzo de' Medici's circle of allies and friends.<sup>572</sup> In 1445—apparently at the very young age of eighteen, he married the sixteen-year-old Nanna, youngest daughter of Neri di Gino Capponi and aunt to Piero di Gino, one of the leading citizens of Florence.<sup>573</sup> Tanai, Francesco's sole surviving son, and Nanna were to remain married for an astonishing fifty-three years and have a truly extraordinary number of children who grew into adulthood, nine sons and six daughters in all.<sup>574</sup> Several of his sons participated actively in public life and all his children married into well-connected families such as the Sassetis and the Morellis.<sup>575</sup> Tanai himself became *gonfaloniere di giustizia* in 1472 and

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571. Tanai's father Francesco was elected one of the Ufficiali del Banco in the local governing council or Balìa of 1438. Nicholas Eckstein, The District of the Green Dragon: Neighborhood Life and Social Change in Renaissance Florence (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1995), 184 and n. 38.

572. William Kent included Tanai among the members of an exclusive circle of Lorenzo de' Medici's friends who followed the Medicis' example in setting up a domestic chapel in their *palazzo*. "Individuals and Families as Patrons of Culture in Quattrocento Florence," in Alison Brown, ed., Language and Images of Renaissance Italy (Oxford, 1995), 190. Tanai also contributed to a selection of poems in honor of Lorenzo, the Lauretum: Sive Carmina in Laudem Laurentii Medicis, ms. 23, 2, 52, Biblioteca Lorenziana, Florence. Two of the churches patronized by Tanai, Santo Spirito and, particularly, San Salvatore al Monte, were churches in which Lorenzo became an *operaio*.

573. The dates of Tanai's birth and marriage are based on the handwritten genealogy established by Luigi Passerini. Passerini, Genealogia e storia della famiglia Nerli (Florence: Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Fondo Passerini 43, cc.1–196) ; Nelson ("La posizione dei ritratti nelle pale d'altare," in Zambrano and Nelson, Filippino Lippi, 461). The date of 1445 for Tanai's marriage accords with his inclusion of his second child and oldest daughter Caterina—age seven—in his *castato* declaration of 1457. Passerini's dates imply that Tanai married at eighteen, a surprisingly early age for a Florentine male of the upper classes. His bride, born in 1429 (Nelson, "La posizione," 461) would have been sixteen. The resulting two-year age gap between bride and groom was also unusually short for a Florentine couple in the mid-fifteenth century. David Herlihy and Christiane Klapisch-Zuber, Tuscans and Their Families: A Study of the Florentine Castato of 1427 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), 218–20. If correct, Tanai's age almost certainly contributed to the length of the marriage and to the large number of children born to the couple. It may, as well, have facilitated communication and the establishment of a rapport between the marriage partners. See Klapisch-Zuber, Women, Family, and Ritual in Renaissance Italy, trans. Lydia Cochrane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 20, opining that the average age gap of eight years "exacerbated the woman's marginality among her husband's kin, the demand for her submissiveness, and the lack of communication between spouses."

574. According to Passerini, Tanai's ninth child, Niccolo, was illegitimate.

575. Gammurrini, "Famiglia de' Nerli," 12.

again in 1495.<sup>576</sup> His involvement in the events that followed the death of Lorenzo de' Medici 1492 and the French invasion of Italy in 1494 reveal his keen interest in affairs of state and also the affinity of interests and attitude between him and his nephew by marriage, Piero Capponi. Lorenzo de' Medici's son Piero, having alienated the French in favor of a greater alliance with Naples, found himself confronted by the French king Charles VIII, whose army, stationed near Pisa, threatened Florence. In response to Piero's subsequent attempts to conciliate Charles, the Florentine Signoria, at a meeting at which Tanai and his son Jacopo actively participated, sent out an officially sanctioned delegation that included both Tanai and Piero Capponi, along with Savonarola and two others. Shortly thereafter, on November 9, 1494, Tanai's son Jacopo was instrumental in refusing entry to the Palazzo Vecchio to Piero de' Medici and his guard, an event that precipitated Piero's flight from Florence.<sup>577</sup> Tanai himself occupied numerous posts in the short-lived post-Medicean republic in addition to his appointment as *gonfaloniere di giustizia* in 1495.<sup>578</sup> For instance, along with Bernardo di Niccolo Capponi, he was charged with inventorying the possessions of the exiled Medici. Like Piero Capponi, Tanai belonged to an oligarchy that supported the republic while resisting the movement, fostered by Savonarola, toward a more broadly representative democracy along Venetian lines. He is mentioned by Guicciardini, along with his sons Benedetto and Jacopo, as an adamant opponent of Savonarola.<sup>579</sup>

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576. Nelson, "La posizione dei ritratti," 461.

577. Guidubaldo Guidi, Cio che accadde al tempo della signoria di novembre dicembre in Firenze l'anno 1494 (Florence: Arnaud editore, 1988).

578. Ibid, 176. Tanai's oldest son, Benedetto, served as the Florentine Republic's envoy to Venice. Gamurrini, "Famiglia de' Nerli," 27.



As we know, Tanai's opposition to the Dominican preacher was shared by the mendicants generally, including the friars of Santo Spirito, whose *opera* Tanai joined in 1492. A celebrated ancestor of Tanai's, Fra Francesco di Bionozzo de Nerli, was a preacher and a master of theology at Santo Spirito.<sup>580</sup> However, prior to their exile in France, the Nerli patronized the church of Santa Maria del Carmine, more closely tied to the San Frediano district of the Oltrarno.<sup>581</sup> Over the course of the Nerlis' prolonged exile, the Carmelite friars had sold the rights to the Nerli family tomb to another family, the Nerlo, and had allowed the Soderini family to occupy part of the Nerli chapel.<sup>582</sup> As a result, Tanai turned his back on the Carmelites and buried his father under a marble tomb slab in the Franciscan church of Santa Croce, where he dedicated a nearby altar to Saint Catherine of Alexandria.<sup>583</sup> In 1465, he commissioned an altarpiece from Neri di Bicci, Saint Felicity and her sons (fig. 86) for a chapel purchased at the Benedictine church of Santa Felicita in the Oltrarno.<sup>584</sup> His most extensive patronage efforts involved the purchase of three chapels, a double chapel to the right of the main altar and two smaller chapels, at San Salvatore al Monte, an observant Franciscan church located

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579. Francesco Guicciardini, "Storie Florentine dal 1378 al 1509," in Opere di Francesco Guicciardini, ed. Roberto Palmarocchi, 4 vols. (Bari: Laterza, 1931), 148. The Nerlis' opposition to Savonarola, ordinarily linked to their patrician status, may also have been fostered by their relationship with the Franciscans of Santa Croce and the observant Franciscans at San Salvatore al Monte.

580. Richa, IX, 62. Fra Francesco was the first graduate in theology from the Florentine Studium. Gamurrini, "Famiglia de' Nerli," 23; Gutierrez, Augustinians in the Middle Ages, 126.

581. Gamurrini, "Famiglia de' Nerli," 17. Capretti, in "La pinacoteca sacra" (283), asserts that the Nerli had rights to a chapel at the old church of Santo Spirito; however, Quinterio's list of identified altars at the old church does not support that claim. Quinterio, "Il complesso di Santo Spirito," 42 n. 11.

582. Gamurrini, "Famiglia de' Nerli," 17–18.

583. Ibid., 16.

584. Ibid.; Francesca Fiorelli Molesci, La Chiesa di Santa Felicita a Firenze (Florence: Becocchi/Scala, 1986), 227–30.

immediately above Florence and actively patronized by Lorenzo de' Medici.<sup>585</sup> Marble slabs in the double chapel and the one remaining single chapel, dated to 1496 and 1497 respectively, refer to the descendants of Tanai de Nerli. It is thus very likely that Tanai and his wife were also buried at San Salvatore, perhaps in the chapel that is now destroyed.<sup>586</sup> In addition, according to Vasari, Tanai commissioned from Filippino an altarpiece for one of the chapels at San Salvatore.<sup>587</sup> A panel executed by Filippino's workshop, Saint Francis in Glory with the Blessed Lucchese di Poggibonsi, Saint Louis IX of France, Saint Elizabeth of Hungary and the Blessed Bona, is widely taken to be a workshop version of Filippino's original composition for that church.<sup>588</sup>

It thus appears that Tanai's ties to Santo Spirito were formed late and did not involve the purchase of a burial plot, either for himself or for his family. Current scholarly approaches to Florentine lay patronage in fifteenth-century churches have focused on a culture of competitive display expressive not only of relative wealth and its legitimate expenditure, but also of participation in important networks of access and influence.<sup>589</sup> Such a perspective frames a patron's purchase of a chapel and participation

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585. Gamurrini, "Famiglia de' Nerli," 16. Linda Pellecchia Najemy, "The First Observant Church of San Salvatore al Monte," Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz 23 (1979): 273–96.

586. The double and remaining single chapel each contain a marble slab inscribed "S[epulcrum] descne[mentum] tanais fran[cisci] phi[lippi] de Nerlis" with the Nerli arms and the dates. Nelson, "La posizione dei ritratti," 462 n. 61. The Paatz assert that the Nerli tomb is located in the Old Sacristy—the *Cappellone*—of San Salvatore. Walter Paatz and Elizabeth Valentiner Paatz, Die Kirchen von Florenz: Ein kunstgeschichtliches Handbuch (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1952–55), 5:51, 57.

587. Vasari, Lives of the Painters, 1:567.

588. Nelson, cat. R 32. Fig. 396, 466. A drawing by Filippino in Rome, depicting Saint Francis giving the rule of the Franciscan Tertiary Orders to Saint Louis of France and Elizabeth of Hungary, may be a study for Filippino's San Salvatore altarpiece. Goldner and Bambach, Drawings of Filippino Lippi, fig. 78, 265.

589. Goldthwaite, "Demand for Religious Art," 69–148. Jill Burke, "Family, Church, Community: The Appearance of Power in Santo Spirito," chap. 3 in Changing Patrons, 63–83. Nelson, in "La posizione dei

in a church *opera* as tactical moves in his family's perpetual jockeying for increased honor and power within a dense social fabric of dependants, *amici* and patrons.<sup>590</sup> Enhanced social access and self-display were very likely at issue for Tanai de Nerli. He joined the *opera* of Santo Spirito two years after Lorenzo de' Medici took that step, and included full-length figures of himself and his wife in his chapel's altarpiece. Yet, the inevitable obverse of social opportunity is extensive and perpetual social obligation whose dereliction threatened family honor. Tanai, for instance, contributed funds to the Santo Spirito *opera* throughout the 1490s<sup>591</sup> and attempted to purchase a chapel in the nave for a friend.<sup>592</sup> In the case of the Nerlis, sensitivity to issues of clan honor may have been amplified by the family's patrician status and a history marked by a century and a half of exile.<sup>593</sup>

It appears likely, as well, that Tanai felt a particular sense of obligation toward his relatives by marriage, the Capponi. As we noted, only one chapel—belonging to other *parentade* of the Capponi, the Nasi—separated the Nerli chapel from that of the Capponi (no. 13). Moreover, two other chapels in the right-hand transept (nos. 8 and 9) belonged to branches of the extended Capponi family, the Capponi di San Frediano and the Capponi d'Altopascio respectively. The presence of the Capponi coat of arms on the right-hand side of the Nerli altarpiece predella, below the painted figure of Nanna

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ritratti" (462), describes Tanai's chapel in Santo Spirito as "a public affirmation of wealth, status, piety and civic pride."

590. Rubin, *Images and Identity* xvii.

591. ASF, CRS 122, 128, fols. 222r and 231r, cited in Burke, *Changing Patrons*, 72 n. 54.

592. ASF, CRA 122, 67, 128, fols. 219v and 224r, cited in Burke, *Changing Patrons*, 73 n. 59.

593. Tanai had openly protested the adoption of his name and arms by a certain individual who was not related to him during the period of his family's exile; this despite Lorenzo de' Medici's attempt at conciliation and the offer of substantial compensation in exchange for his adopting a more accommodating attitude. Gamurrini, "Famiglia de' Nerli," 17–18.

Capponi, is a significant departure from the practice at Santo Spirito. Other existing quattrocento altarpiece frames commissioned for the church include only identical coats of arms of the donor's family symmetrically situated at both corners of the predella. The common political posture of Tanai de Nerli and Piero Capponi and their common involvement in government affairs during the mid-1490s suggest a close bond beyond that created by their kinship through marriage. This context, I will argue, affected in significant ways the design and ultimate appearance of the Nerli altarpiece.

## 2. Literature

Until recently, scholarship on the Nerli altarpiece was limited to ascertaining its correct dates,<sup>594</sup> although Luciano Berti and Umberto Baldini, in 1957, spoke of the pervasive atmosphere of melancholy suggested by the painting's muted effect of evening light.<sup>595</sup> Urbain Mengin took a more iconographic approach, noting the dedication of the chapel to Saint Martin, present in both the altarpiece and the chapel window, and the vivid red garment worn by a prominently placed male figure in the panel's mid-ground (fig. 96). The Nerli's red and white colors on the groom standing nearby clearly connect that figure with the Nerli family. Mengin concluded that the figure was a depiction of the patron Tanai de Nerli, and that Tanai must have belonged to the Buonomini di San Martino, an active and highly respected Florentine charitable organization.<sup>596</sup>

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594. Supra, nn. 5, 6.

595. Berti and Baldini, Filippino Lippi (Florence, 1957), quoted in Baldini, "La pala di Santo Spirito di Filippino Lippi," Critica d'Arte 53, 5, 18 (1988): 24.

596. Mengin, Les deux Lippis, 126. Nelson was not able to find Tanai's name in the company's extensive archival documentation ("La posizione dei ritratti," 467 n. 93). Founded in 1422 through the intermediary of Sant Antonino, archbishop of Florence, and Cosimo de' Medici, the Congregazione dei Buonomini di San Martino per il soccorso ai poveri vergognosi was dedicated to relief of the poor "who," according to the company statutes, "are not accustomed to beg, and [for whom] misfortune has caused much suffering." At least originally, the company's clientele consisted primarily of families who had lost

In 1988, Bridgeman rejected Mengin's suggestion for lack of evidence. She too believed that the red-clad figure in the panel's middle ground was Tanai, but argued that he was depicted in the red garb of an ambassador in the act of leaving for—or returning from—a specific and highly significant diplomatic mission. As we have seen, Tanai did indeed participate—along with his wife's nephew Piero di Gino Capponi, Savonarola and two others—in an embassy to Charles VIII of France. This mission, which was relatively successful given the circumstances, returned to Florence on Saint Martin's day, November 11, 1494, passing through Florence's Porta San Frediano, represented, Bridgeman thought, by the massive gate in Filippino's altarpiece. Moreover, the treaty between the Florentines and Charles VIII was signed on November 25, 1494, the feast day of Saint Catherine of Alexandria.

Bridgeman's account was found persuasive by both Capretti and Eckstein.<sup>597</sup> Nelson, on the other hand, submitted her thesis to a vigorous critique and ultimately rejected it.<sup>598</sup> He noted, most importantly, that the red *lucco* worn by the mid-ground figure is characteristic, not only of ambassadors, but also broadly of Florentine male figures of the ruling elite.<sup>599</sup> Nelson pointed out, as well, that the departure and return of ambassadorial delegations in quattrocento Florence were public events accompanied with

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their breadwinner. John Henderson, *Piety and Charity in Late Medieval Florence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 388–97. Lorenzo Fatichi, preface to *Confraternity of the Bonimini di San Martino: Historical Archive*, by M. Raffaella de Gramatica and Ludovica Sebgondi (Florence: Edizioni della Meridiana, 2001).

597. Capretti, "La pinacoteca sacra," 283; Nicholas Eckstein, "Neighborhood as Microcosm," in *Renaissance Florence*, ed. Roger J. Crum and John T. Paoletti (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 229; Eckstein, *District of the Green Dragon*, 185.

598. Nelson, "La posizione dei ritratti," 466–67.

599. "Those [among Renaissance Florentines males] who held public office, roughly 5 percent of the population, evidently clothed themselves, at least for their portraits, in amply cut, unbelted calf-length mantles and gowns (*cioppe* or *lucchi*) of plain, rich crimson woolen cloth." Carole Collier Frick, *Dressing Renaissance Florence: Families, Fortunes, and Fine Clothing* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 149.

ceremonial trappings, none of which are apparent in the tranquil domestic scene painted by Filippino. In addition, Nelson argued that the couple at the front door of their palazzo was clearly younger than Tanai and his wife would have been in 1494, the year of the embassy.<sup>600</sup> Instead, Nelson suggests that the scene could refer to the family of Benedetto, Tanai's oldest son, or "simply to any of the numerous sons or nephews of Tanai." If the latter supposition is correct, the presence of several generations of Nerli within the image would signal the importance of the lineage as a whole to the message delivered by the painting and to the values that it celebrates.<sup>601</sup>

Finally, as Nelson asserted, the inclusion of Saints Martin and Catherine of Alexandria in the altarpiece may be explained by a number of factors beyond the dates of their feast days—Tanai's association with France, whose patron saint was Saint Martin, and what appears to have been a familial devotion to Saint Catherine of Alexandria. The Nerli had dedicated an altar to her by the Santa Croce tomb of Tanai's father, and had named their firstborn daughter Caterina. Indeed, Saint Catherine was a popular female saint among the Florentine upper classes<sup>602</sup> and, just as importantly, was much favored by the Augustinian Hermits.<sup>603</sup>

To these reservations we should add the question whether the friars, having submitted to the patron's desire to include portraits of himself and his wife in the

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600. On this issue, Bridgeman herself wrote, not entirely convincingly, "It is often, however, exceedingly difficult to judge a person's age from their features and an artist's not infrequent need to flatter a patron should also be taken into account. It should be noted that Tanai's wife, who was born in 1429 looks a plausible sixty-seven years." Bridgeman, "Filippino Lippi's Nerli Altarpiece," 671. To the contrary, the female figure who stands erect and broad shouldered on the palazzo steps has the chestnut hair of a woman younger than sixty-seven.

601. Nelson, "La posizione dei ritratti," 466.

602. Rubin, *Images and Identity*, 31–33.

603. Norman, *Siena and the Virgin*, 134.

altarpiece—a departure at Santo Spirito—would have countenanced a prominent, centrally located narrative vignette that cued a purely secular message. We know that quattrocento representations of scriptural narratives in chapel frescoes frequently included portraits of the donor, his family and associates. The best-known instance is probably Ghirlandaio’s fresco sequence for the Tuornabuoni chapel at Santa Maria Novella. In such cases, however, the identifiable figures were portrayed as witnesses to or participants in a sacred narrative. It is surely a different matter to lead the viewer away from the image of the Madonna and Child, interceding saints and praying donors to a pictorial narrative from the domain of contemporary politics. Arguably, Bridgeman’s thesis reflects—if only from a distance—a reading of Renaissance culture derived from Burkhardt’s exaltation of individual secular ambition over self-definition rooted in community-wide spiritual preoccupations. Indeed, Filippino’s altarpiece plays into such notions, since it foregrounds a sacred space, behind which unfolds the—apparently—secular domain of palazzo and street.

However, if Bridgeman’s thesis is incorrect, the panel still raises a host of iconographic questions. What of the “family” vignette, which certainly pulls at the viewer’s attention by its central location and the bright crimson garment worn by its dominant figure? Moreover, if the palazzo that serves as a backdrop for that vignette must be identified with the Nerli, as the groom’s livery suggests, why is it situated outside the background city, whose massive gate also imposes itself on the viewer’s attention? In fact, why is so much in this painting—the Madonna’s throne room, the palazzo, the suburban street—located outside the city? Finally, is Bridgeman right in assuming that, since the Nerli palazzo is included in the panel, the background city must

be Florence? Or is that city, as Nelson contends, a general representation of a quattrocento *città*? Neither Nelson, nor Rubin, in her recent sensitive discussion of the painting, has attempted to respond to these iconographic questions. Patricia Rubin noted, however, among other observations, the painting's "extraordinary visual density"<sup>604</sup> and the prevalence of the red hue, linked to desire and charity.<sup>605</sup> In my analysis of the painting, I follow Nelson in rejecting Bridgeman's theory and seek, beyond Rubin's suggestions, to delineate the role of Christian love in the multiple loci, sacred and mundane, that the painting describes.

## **B. City of God and City of Man**

### **1. Separate and Conjoined Spaces**

In describing the Nerli altarpiece, Rubin focuses on its elaborate and lavish gilt frame. She points out that the frame pilasters do not match the painted pilasters of Filippino's loggia and that no figure in the panel looks out at the beholder. She concludes that the altarpiece as a whole "insists upon the status of the image as image" and that, as a result, the painting is not accessible to imaginative entry: "The empty space in front of the Virgin is not reserved for the worshipper."<sup>606</sup> I will argue, on the other hand, that the "empty space"—but only that space—is accessible to the imaginary beholder, who, in terms of projected physical access, can penetrate no further.

As in most of the roughly contemporary altarpieces painted for Santo Spirito—the Carbonelli *sacra conversazione*, on the other side of the apse, the Bardi altarpiece and the Capponi Visitation, for example—the foreground flooring is nonspecific as to its

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604. Rubin, Images and Identity, 225.

605 Ibid., 220.

606. Rubin, Images and Identity, 225.



substance and neutral in color. The more common alternative in fifteenth-century altarpieces is the brightly hued tiling found at Santo Spirito in Botticini's Santa Monica altarpiece. Because the neutral floor of the painted space does not assert itself as a sign for a specific material, it can serve both as an extension of the altar table and as the floor of a space that is continuous with the space of the chapel. In the case of the Nerli altarpiece in particular, the frame's narrow predella, together with the empty space depicted immediately above, facilitates the viewer's imaginative transition from altar table to image. The predella inscription, "Virgo dei Genitrix Intercede Pro Nostra Omnium Que Salute," positioned midway between viewer and painting, alludes to the beholder—"omnium que salute"—and thus binds him or her to the act of prayer performed within the painting itself. Rather than representing a physical obstacle to entry into the image, the inscribed predella becomes a spiritual bridge.<sup>607</sup>

However, once inside the painting, kneeling before the Virgin, we find our progress cut short. We cannot move, imaginatively, beyond the open loggia that occupies the foreground. On the left, the beholder is blocked by Mary's knee and the Christ Child at play with Saint John's cross. While the opening to the right of the Virgin's throne would seem to offer further access, the terrain located immediately beyond the loggia parapet does not function semiotically. It is an indistinct dark-greenness that gives no information about the angle of the ground, its texture, height or distance in depth. Our imaginary physical transition out of the loggia is cut short.

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607. To respond to Rubin, we might suggest that the predella inscription, in bridging the gap between painting and actual space, replaces the figure who traditionally looks out at the beholder from within the painting.

Thus, while the emphatic continuity of the chapel and the painted space of the loggia propels the viewer physically into the foreground of the painting, the street, the hillside and the background city are stationed in a realm of pure visibility, severed from imagined access. At the same time, obtruding figures and the pilasters of the loggia frame and limit what may actually be seen, reasserting the constricted specificity of the beholder's locus of observation within the loggia. Filippino's handling of perspective heightens this emphasis on the sequestered immobility of the perceiving subject. The orthogonals formed by the upper edge of the pilaster bases to the right and left of the Virgin appear designed to lead the eye out to a spatially believable world beyond the loggia. However, while the orthogonal on the right is prolonged by the palazzo benches and roofs of the suburban houses, and thus do lead our vision into the depth of the image, the orthogonal on the left are blocked by intervening figures. In addition, both the left-side orthogonal and the vanishing point are obscured by Mary's body. As a result, our sense of being carried out into the depicted space by the full pull of geometric perspective is curtailed.

At the same time, Filippino has taken account of atmospheric perspective, blurring the hill in the far background down to a gray silhouette. The artist's purpose may have been to suggest an immensity of distance between the silhouetted hill and the viewer; in doing so, he has also reemphasized the viewer's stationary status. What we see is far away, and it is far away because we remain where we are. In rigorously locating its viewing subject and circumscribing what may be seen, Filippino's work differs markedly from the open vista of Piero di Cosimo's Visitation under its blazing sunlight.

The image is fashioned to respond to and to guide the human subjectivity that will construct its effect and its meaning.

One effect of the viewer's fixed location within the foreground loggia is to express in experiential terms the character of that loggia as a space segregated from the world beyond.

To quote again from Rubin's analysis: "Filippino," she states, "has imagined the Virgin in the midst of everyday life."<sup>608</sup> Her assertion describes the painting as an instantaneously apprehended totality. As I have suggested in earlier chapters, fifteenth-century beholders were just as likely to engage in viewing that was descriptive, analytic and itemized—closer, in fact, to an actual reading—and that at the same time engaged the viewer on an experiential and ultimately emotional level. Applied to the Nerli altarpiece, such an approach breaks down the totality that is the painted image into interlinked spatial components, which encourage different forms of imaginative viewing. To paraphrase and contradict Rubin, Filippino has imagined the Virgin as segregated from and elevated above everyday life. Her back to the palazzo, the street and the city, she interposes herself, at once graceful and massive, between the beholder and the world visible beyond the loggia.

That world itself appears made of several self-contained loci. A large green tree dominates the hill on the left and cuts it off from the city in the background. At the edge of the courtyard on the right, the chestnut horse tethered to the palazzo conceals the access road from the courtyard to the street below and thus isolates the locus formed by the palazzo courtyard. At the end of the street, a massive stone gate dwarfs its own narrow open archway so that it operates visually as a sign of enclosure and exclusion. A

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608. Rubin, *Images and Identity*, 218.

woman with a basket on her head and holding a child by the hand walks through that archway, leaving the viewer behind. Past the city gate, all we can see is a rough configuration of facades and roofs. To either side of the gate stretch high crenellated ramparts, while, on the left of the panel, the city is cut off by a moatlike stretch of water and the abrupt verticals of its own walls. What Filippino has created is a geography of specific and distinct loci: loggia, courtyard, street, hill, city. Clearly, this is a painting in which locus and, consequently, the relationship between different loci, matter. It matters, for instance, that the loggia that is Mary's throne room and the palazzo of the Nerli are located outside the city. It matters as well that the loggia and the city are placed far apart, in the respective foreground and the background of the painting.

Loggia and city do share certain attributes. Unlike the more parceled middle ground, they both extend to the full width of the painting. They are manifestly enclosed within the loggia arcade on one hand and behind the city ramparts and walls on the other. In both cases these enclosures are porous. That fact, obvious in the case of the loggia, is also true of the city, pierced by its gate on the right of the panel, and on its left, by multiple arched entryways. These parallels encourage us to read these spaces as the two poles of Filippino's topography, separated by an intermediary zone, a liminal space that is neither loggia nor city, itself splintered into subsidiary zones—palazzo, street and hill.

The different loci set out within the painting are thus distinguished in the geographical terms of location, boundary and distance. They are also characterized by specific formal differences that imply different modes of address or rhetorical stances. The space occupied by the foreground loggia within the overall panel is actually quite restricted given the number of figures that occupy it. Yet, the monumentality of these

figures, their formidably erect and graceful postures and the ample sweep of their garments create a sense of breadth and grandeur that itself expands the space that surrounds them. The symmetrical position of the saints and patrons, two each on either side of the Virgin, is characteristic of *sacra conversazione* generally, of course, and perhaps more so of the altarpieces commissioned for Santo Spirito during the 1480s. Here, the architectonic stability of the figures' placement is enhanced by the rhythmic repeat of the loggia arches behind them. The large triangular form of the Virgin, grounded on the wide base of her throne, forms the core and the apex of a trapezoid shape that includes the erect saints and the kneeling patrons. Both Saint Martin to her right and Catherine to her left, each dressed in white and rose, stand respectively within the far right and far left arches, while Tanai and Nanna, both in black, kneel in the immediate foreground. In addition, the altarpiece is rigorously divided between male and female sides; Christ and the young Saint John the Baptist join Saint Martin and Tanai de Nerli to the Virgin's right, while Mary's face is turned towards Catherine and Nanna on her left. What is conveyed is the expression of the sacred through an integrated effect of coherence, gravity and grandeur.

At the same time, the structural balance of the foreground composition supports a profuse ornamentation from the cherubs atop the capitals to the grotesques that decorate the pilasters and to the deep and highly plastic relief carvings on the Virgin's throne. The multilayered garments of the Virgin and the saints offer, as well, highly decorative contrasts of textures and sheen. Saint Martin's thickly embroidered black cope sets off the lush rose of its lining, while the yellow-green lining of Mary's blue mantle gleams like satin. Saint Catherine wears a heavy scarlet cloak over a loose silver gown and

orange sleeves. Mary and Catherine's mantles are elaborately embroidered in gold at the hem. Their dark blond hair, veiled and tied in a red scarf in the Virgin's case, and, in Catherine's exquisitely knotted in a delicate veil that covers her neck and throat, reach a climax of subtlety and refinement. The patrons' black clothing also retains ornamental touches, such as the fur lining visible and gleaming scarlet sleeves of Tanai's garment.

The most vivid ornament of the foreground scene may be Filippino's bold treatment of color. Clearly, an effort was made to promote the overall unity of the painting through continuities of hue. The subdued silver whites of Saint Martin's and Saint Catherine's robes echo the browns, grays and whites of the cityscape beyond the loggia. The yellow-green loggia wall above the arcade and the green lining of Mary's cloak correspond to the green-yellows of the palazzo lawn and the hill. Nevertheless, much of the color play in the foreground scene is self-referring. The nuanced tonalities of the tawny Christ Child and the young Saint John the Baptist extend the honey brown of the flooring and the wood of the pilasters and the throne into a background of gold-brown. Against this backdrop of muted brown-golds and whites, the expanse of blue that is Mary's mantle plays against the rose of Martin's cape and Mary's head scarf, the saturated crimson fields of Tanai's capo and Mary's own red *gamurra*, and the lighter values of Catherine's gleaming red silk cloak. Filippino's rhetorical language here, to use once again the Ciceronian distinctions made by Augustine in his De Doctrina Cristiana, treats "great matters" in the "grand manner" whose purpose is to "move" the audience.<sup>609</sup> He adorns the balance and gravity of the *sacra conversazione* structure with copious ornament, including brilliant color.

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609. Augustine, De Doctrina Christiaan, IV, 17, 34, 220–23.

A very different language is spoken beyond the arches of the loggia. The palazzo with its four-square solidity, symmetrical arrangement of doors and windows and its rectilinear courtyard maintains to some degree the qualities of order and balance that underlie the foreground scene. Yet, its unadorned facade and its single row of plain arched windows above an arched door have something of an old-fashioned air. The building has none of the ground-floor rustication, embedded pilasters or windows framed *all'antica* that would be typical, according to Kent, of a late fifteenth-century Florentine palazzo in the Medicean circles in which Tanai de Nerli moved.<sup>610</sup> The suburban scene below the palace presents us with a similar lack of aesthetic ornament. Modest houses and shops of varied shapes and sizes delineate a space of uncertain boundaries, neither quite street nor piazza. The stone gate, as well, though solidly built of massive limestone blocks, is unadorned with the sole exception of the Madonna banner hung on its exterior. Apparently inconsequential occurrences—dogs meet, a boy runs by—are all described with a sketchy, rapid brush. Architectural and sculptural ornament is replaced by anecdote—women on a roof terrace, workmen with their carts and burdens, a mother holding her child by the hand. At the same time, the reduced scale of the mid-ground suburban street, as well as the number of incidental details, creates an increasingly rapid stylistic tempo as one moves away from the solemnity of the foreground and past the weighty symmetry of the palazzo.

In depicting the background city, Filippino's treatment shifts again. He presents us with a hectic concatenation of towers, monuments and houses, void of both ornament and incident. On the right, splintered and shifting views of towers and domes appear to

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610. F. W. Kent, "Palaces, Politics and Society in Fifteenth-century Florence," in *I Tatti Studies: Essays in the Renaissance*, vol. 2 (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1987), 41–70.

recede into a haze, while on the left, a restless geometry of wall and roof climbs a hill, riddled with crenellations and the dark holes of its windows. Overall, the rough and utilitarian texture of brick predominates. With its fortresses and endlessly multiplied towers, the city creates an effect of inchoate power unredeemed by the order evident in the loggia and the palazzo courtyard or by the civic values that underlie the aesthetic of ornament and *magnificenza*.<sup>611</sup>

Similarly, Filippino's color palette and his use of light shift as he moves away from the loggia and penetrates deeper into the fictional space of the painting. The palazzo scene retains some of the bright contrasting hues of the foreground in the creamy white of the palazzo façade and the crimson *lucco* worn by the adult male figure before the palazzo. The painting's mid-ground beyond is enlivened by a subtle play of light emanating, not from outside the painting as with the foreground scene, but squarely from the left. Light from this source turns to gold the pathways that run across and up the hill and the left side of the tree trunks. This same light touches with gold two of the houses on the suburban street, paints the ground of that street a creamy ivory and gives the roofs a rosy tone that simulates the rose lining of Saint Martin's cloak. Farther back, the light reaches the crenellations of the city wall and, within the city, the facade of a church situated just beyond the gate.

Elsewhere, however, the city is located too far back to catch the raking light from the left. Instead, the cubes and verticals of its houses and towers are woven in dark grays, yellow-browns, rusts and blacks that convey the rugged texture of brick and stone. An imposing fortress and the gray horizon line of the sea to the right appear veiled in a haze. This effect, which does not seem related to the atmospheric perspective that blurs the far

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611. Rubin, *Images and Identity*, 15–57.



more distant hill on the left, suggests a morning mist drifting in from the sea, not yet dispelled by the sunlight shining in from the left. While this light mist lingers over the monuments and towers on the right, the cityscape to the left is more crisply drawn and maintains a unified charcoal tonality. Rough and somber walls are mirrored in the still water of the moat or canal, and the light rose of the sloping roofs visible in the mid-ground street have turned to brown and gray.

What seems to be occurring in the painting is a stylistic progression affecting composition, ornament, rhythm, texture, lighting and choice of hue. We move from a harmoniously balanced, exquisitely adorned and brightly hued foreground to a chaotic, rough and dark background, passing through an equivocal mid-ground that gradually gives way to a more haphazard and darker vista. We noted above the strong stylistic inflection of Filippino's grand and heavily ornamented foreground scene. The world extending beyond the loggia, on the other hand, has been stripped of aesthetic ornament. The middle ground, rich in unusual narrative incident and in plentiful and varied detail—the *copia* and *varietà* favored by Quintilian—is depicted in the “middle style” whose purpose is to “delight” and in so doing to teach. Finally, the rough geometry of the background city, bare of both ornament and anecdotal detail, bare, in fact, of visible inhabitants, attempts at a direct transmission of its lesson and approximates the “plain style.” A closer focus on the attributes of these distinct loci and the tensions in their relationship with each other should help us identify them and evaluate their significance in terms of the concerns of the patron and the values important to the Santo Spirito Augustinians.

## 2. The Loggia

In his discussion of the altarpiece, Nelson observed that the arcade enclosing the foreground space resembles the niches of vegetation that form the backdrop of the Bardi altarpiece. He concludes that the loggia arcade, like the Bardi niches, most likely refers to the arcaded colonnades of the church of Santo Spirito itself.<sup>612</sup> In addition, the three pilasters of the arcade are each topped with a grisaille putto. While the putti to the left and the right hold up the Nerli arms, a gold horizontal band over red and white stripes, the central putto clasps a sculpture of a dove, its wings outspread. The location of this dove recalls the sculpted doves visible on the bases of many of the Santo Spirito capitals, and, in particular, one with outstretched wings placed above the central column of the apse.<sup>613</sup> The distinct chalky grisaille of the dove and the three *putti*, a contrast with the carved and paneled wood that otherwise characterizes the loggia, would itself suggest the *pietra serena* typical of Brunelleschi's churches, Santo Spirito among them. Placed immediately above the Virgin and Child, the dove likely refers to the role of the Holy Spirit in the Incarnation. Just as importantly, it refers to the church of Santo Spirito in which the beholder stands, to the active presence of the Holy Spirit within that church and convent, and to the engagement of the Holy Spirit with the values at issue in the Nerli chapel. More generally, the three putti on the loggia arcade remind us clearly that the loggia represented in the foreground of the altarpiece is located at Santo Spirito, and specifically in that part of Santo Spirito that belongs to the Nerli—in other words, the Nerli chapel.

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612. Nelson, "La posizione dei ritratti," 491.

613. Supra, 46, 47.

Yet, despite a nominal resemblance between the painted arcade of the Nerli altarpiece and Santo Spirito's multiple arches, the fact is that the loggia, including its arcade, does not actually resemble Brunelleschi's architecture. Not only is Mary's throne room built of wood and not stone, but, as we have seen, it is richly adorned according to a decorative aesthetic that is alien to Brunelleschi's serene austerity.<sup>614</sup> Moreover, in comparison with the dimensions of Brunelleschi's arches at Santo Spirito, the curvature of Filippino's painted arches is flattened and the height of his pilaster capitals abbreviated. As Berti and Baldini noted, flattened arches, found at the Baths of Diocletian and on Roman sarcophagi, appear as well in certain thirteenth-century Tuscan paintings.<sup>615</sup> They make an appearance in Filippino's panel, most likely in order to balance the unusual proportions of the abbreviated capitals. The capitals themselves likely derive from the decorations of the Domus Aurea, Nero's Roman palace, rediscovered in about 1480 and dug out over several generations.<sup>616</sup>

Drawings by Filippino, based on or reproducing motifs found in the Domus Aurea, make it clear that the artist visited that monument during his stay in Rome.<sup>617</sup> According to the

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614. On the other hand, the Nerli chapel would have faced the wooden stalls of the choir, built probably between 1483 and 1494. As we saw, a section from the Santo Spirito choir, later kept at the sacristy of San Domenico in Fiesole, is paneled, carved and decorated with intarsia (fig. 16). Lisner, "Andrea Sansovino," 257. In addition, the classically inspired carvings that decorate Filippino's loggia are akin to the elaborate and insistently classicizing sculptural work undertaken during the 1490s by Giuliano da Sangallo and Cronaca in the Santo Spirito sacristy and vestibule (fig. 22).

615. Berti and Baldini mention specifically two altarpieces at the Uffizi, The Madonna and Child Enthroned with Eight Angels and Four Prophets by Cimabue and The Madonna and Child with Six Angels by Duccio; in both panels flattened arches decorate the Virgin's throne. Filippino Lippi, 1957, quoted in Baldini, "La pala di Santo Sprito," 24.

616. Nicole Dacos, La Decouverte de la Domus Aurea et la Formation des Grottesques a la Renaissance (London: The Warburg Institute, 1969).

617. For instance, the verso of a sheet now at the Uffizi (1255 E) displays a Departure of Hippolytus for the Hunt, a Harpy, and a Decorative Frieze reproduced from the Domus Aurea. Goldner and Bambach, Drawings of Filippino Lippi, fig. 65 v, 236–37.

research of Nicole Dacos, late quattrocento artists who entered the Domus Aurea had access to crawl spaces at the top of a limited number of rooms; this allowed them to observe these rooms' stuccoed and painted ceilings.<sup>618</sup> It seems probably that they would also have been able—at least in some cases—to see the upper portion of the walls in these rooms. One of the principal ceilings discovered in the fifteenth century, la volta degli stucchi, now considerably defaced, is known to us primarily by its pendant vault in the symmetrically positioned Achilles room.<sup>619</sup> The walls of the Achilles room are decorated with stuccoed pilasters topped by abbreviated capitals that closely resemble these in the Nerli altarpiece (fig. 87). Filippino retained the stuccoed volutes of the Achilles room capitals, but turned them upside down to create the carved capitals of the loggia arcade.<sup>620</sup> The painted candelabra on the Domus Aurea pilasters, which Filippino would not have been able to see, are replaced in the altarpiece by carved grotesques. These include two motifs from a well-known group of friezes displaying sacrificial and nautical instruments, embedded, until the sixteenth century, in the walls of San Lorenzo fuori le Mura.<sup>621</sup>

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618. Dacos, La Decouverte de la Domus Aurea, 9-13, 14.

619. *Ibid.*, 13-14.

620. Filippino's inventive treatment of classical motifs here is characteristic of the artist. Many scholars have noted the freedom and creativity with which Filippino made use of antique motifs. Innis Howe Shoemaker, "Filippino and His Antique Sources," in Goldner and Bambach, Drawings of Filippino Lippi, 30; Nelson, "La rinascita dell'antichità: Forme, formule e miti," in Zambrano and Nelson, Filippino Lippi, 441-42.

621. Nelson, "La posizione dei ritratti," 460. Filippino mingled some of the sacrificial instruments with Christian liturgical objects in a frescoed frieze for the Carafa chapel (Gail L. Geiger, Filippino Lippi's Carafa Chapel: Renaissance Art in Rome [Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1986], 168-69, plate 108) and used others at Poggio a Caiano to decorate the temple of Neptune featured in his Death of Laocoon (Nelson, "La rinascita dell'antichità," 426, fig. 350).

The carvings on the Virgin's throne are also Roman in origin. The ram's head is a recurring motif in classical antiquity, found, for instance, at the upper corners of a candelabra base dedicated to Diana and Venus visible to fifteenth-century viewers at Santa Costanza in Rome.<sup>622</sup> As will be discussed later, Filippino included beribboned and garlanded rams' heads on certain of the pier pilasters of the Carafa chapel.<sup>623</sup> On the other hand, the struggle between female Nereids and male sea-centaurs depicted in a deep-relief carving at the base of the Madonna's throne appears to have no specific classical counterparts. Nereids, tritons and sea-centaurs do appear frequently, however, on Roman sarcophagi accessible to quattrocento artists.<sup>624</sup> Filippino, like Pinturicchio and Piero di Cosimo, made frequent use of decorative Nereids loosely derived from classical sculpture. His Assumption of the Virgin in the Carafa chapel features a sarcophagus prominently decorated with hybrid sea creatures (fig. 88).<sup>625</sup>

### 3. The Window

By the late 1490s an equally exuberant and equally Roman display of *a l'antica* ornament would have been visible elsewhere in the Nerli chapel, specifically in the stained-glass window positioned directly above the altarpiece (fig. 84). Filippino's design for that window depicts Saint Martin on horseback in the act of cutting his cloak in order

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622. Geiger, Carafa Chapel, 174, plate 118.

623. Geiger, Carafa Chapel, 175, plate 121; Enrico Parlato, "L'antico in Filippino Lippi, da Roma a Firenze," in Aspetti della tradizione classica nella cultura artistica fra Umanesimo e Rinascimento: Corso di Lezioni di Storia dell'arte moderna I tenuto da Claudia Cieri Via, ed. Anna Cavallaro (Rome, 1985–86), 116.

624. For instance, an early third-century Roman sarcophagus featuring Nereids and Tritons was located at Santa Maria in Aracoeli by the end of the quattrocento. Phyllis P. Bober and Ruth O. Rubinstein with Susan Woodford, Renaissance Artists and Antique Sculpture (London: Harvey Miller Publishers, 1986), 131, plate 99.

625. Il Cronaca's roughly contemporary vestibule vault at Santo Spirito also includes a Nereid and Triton pair.

to give half of it to the beggar. He placed the saint, his horse and the beggar within a carved niche that appears to recede behind them creating the illusion of an abbreviated three-dimensional space. The curvature of the niche arch echoes the arch of the window frame itself, that of the chapel and the arches of the painted loggia arcade, reinforcing the linkages between the altarpiece, the window and the chapel as a whole. The niche's design is elaborately decorative; it includes framed apertures to either side and, above, a vase bearing lilies and stalks of wheat, candelabra, putti who clasp ribbons and garlands and a plaque inscribed with Saint Martin's name. Below, two sea-centaurs hold up the Nerli coat of arms. Not only is this classicizing presentation very much in the style of the loggia décor, it replicates several of the specific motifs found in the painting's foreground. The two putti seated above the niche in the window design echo the three putti atop the painted pilasters of the altarpiece. The paired sea-centaurs below the niche correspond to the painted sea-centaurs at the base of Mary's throne.<sup>626</sup> Even the garlands and ribbons that decorate the carved ram's head in the altarpiece reappear in the window held up by the stained-glass putti.

The coincidence between the painted ornaments that decorate the altarpiece loggia and these that frame the window's central scene strongly suggest that Filippino intended to link the window design to the altarpiece foreground. It seems that the artist also

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626. Filippino's use of sea-centaurs to uphold the Nerli arms recalls the centaurs that function as individual standard bearers on the Sassetti tombs in Santa Trinita in Florence. In Sassetti's case, the centaur appears to have functioned as a personal *impresa* for the patron. Aby Warburg, "Francesco Sassetti's Last Injunction to His Sons (1907)," in The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance, trans. David Britt (Los Angeles: Getty Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1999), 244. The use of paired centaurs for heraldic purposes in Filippino's Nerli window design may have been suggested by their presence in ancient Roman sarcophagi decorated with Bacchic scenes, in which paired centaurs often pull the god's chariot. The Uffizi retains two of Filippino's designs for paired centaurs, carrying respectively an urn and a lamp, and dating from the last decade of the quattrocento. Goldner and Bambach, Drawings of Filippino Lippi, 61–62.

attempted to adjust the dimensions of the figures in the window with those that occupy the altarpiece foreground (fig. 85). Finally, although Filippino's design for the window does not give us a color scheme, many of the colors employed in Saint Martin's niche would very likely have been similar to those in the panel foreground. By the fifteenth century, the colors of Saint Martin's horse and his cloak were largely standardized in depictions of the saint's interaction with the beggar—a scene often entitled the Charity of Saint Martin. The horse is white and the cloak almost invariably red, the color identified with the virtue of charity. This is the case, for instance, in Lorenzo di Bicci's late thirteenth-century Charity of Saint Martin, once at Orsanmichele (fig. 89).<sup>627</sup> It is also true of the frescoes painted, probably by Ghirlandaio's workshop, for the Oratory of San Martino dei Buonomini in Florence in 1478–79 (fig. 90).<sup>628</sup> It seems reasonable to assume that, in Filippino's window, the cloak that winds its way in repeated S shapes through the image would have been red and that the saint's horse would have been white. Red and white are, we should remember, the Nerli colors and two of the prominent hues that adorn Filippino's loggia.

These multiple correspondences between the painted loggia and the stained-glass niche serve an aesthetic function in unifying the chapel décor. They also speak of a spatial overlap: Mary receives her Nerli supplicants and Saint Martin cuts his cloak in the same locus—the Nerli chapel. The identity of window and panel, as twin spaces,

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627. Di Bicci painted his Charity for the predella of his Saint Martin Enthroned, an altarpiece commissioned by the Vintner's guild for their pilaster at Orsanmichele and now at the Accademia in Florence.

628. Alessio Garetti, ed., Martino: Un santo e la sua civiltà nel racconto dell'arte (Milan: Skira, 2006), 24, 127. The images of the Charity of Saint Martin gathered by Garetti date from the end of the tenth century to the eighteenth; they consistently display the saint's white horse and red cloak, as, for instance, in Cima di Conigliano's ca. 1510 Charity which plays off the white horse and red cloak against large swaths of bright hues (126, fig. 24). One important exception, however, is Simone Martini's golden cloak in the fresco cycle for the Lower Basilica of San Francesco in Assisi (fig. 106).

reinforces the claims made by both loci to “real” spatial existence as extensions of the actual chapel of Saint Martin at Santo Spirito, extensions that are constructed pictorially by the artist and realized imaginatively by the responsive viewer. Thus, the sacred locus of the loggia expands visually and conceptually to assimilate Saint Martin’s niche depicted in the window above.

#### **4. The Palazzo Courtyard**

At the same time, in terms of spatial logistics the loggia reaches out to connect with the varied loci of the panel’s middle ground. The arch on the right side of the painting, behind the figure of Saint Catherine, leads to a curtained vestibule placed at a ninety-degree angle to the picture plane and the loggia. In the darkness of that vestibule, we can make out doorways, one of which appears to be leading further back in depth. The building that houses the loggia thus makes an L-shaped turn, at which point it is concealed from a viewer stationed in the painting’s foreground. We must presume that it retreats into the depth of the painting, until it is closed off by—or else leads into—the palazzo located behind it. While the actual connection between the vestibule and the palazzo is obscured, the viewer is encouraged to imagine an L-shaped grouping of buildings, including the loggia and the palazzo, surrounding a courtyard. As we noted earlier, the groom tending to the horse attached to the palazzo door wears a red-and-white Nerli livery, and thus indicates that the palazzo belongs to the Nerli. Under the architectural scheme suggested by the vestibule, the loggia is not only located in the Nerli chapel at Santo Spirito. It is also linked to—is in some sense a part of—the Nerli family residence.



We do know that the patron of the altarpiece, Tanai de Nerli, engaged in a somewhat similar—albeit substantively different—attempt to appropriate the sacred and insert it within the life of his family, when he built a private chapel within his house in Florence. This *chappelle*, we are told, boasted “choir style seating ... high backed, intarsiated and with a walnut cornice.”<sup>629</sup> It is possible that the wood décor of Filippino’s loggia may thus allude to the walnut used in Nerli’s domestic chapel.<sup>630</sup> In Florence, the architectural form of the loggia was freighted in Florence with connotations both patrician and domestic. It was the setting for the ceremonial gatherings of the *consorteria*, such as marriage feasts, and for more spontaneous meetings of family members.<sup>631</sup> Often situated on semiprivate family piazzas, the loggia was at once private and public, or rather, in Philip Gavitt’s words, “the public face of a private institution.”<sup>632</sup> Tanai di Nerli’s palazzo on the Borgo San Jacopo does not appear to have included a loggia.<sup>633</sup> However, it seems that Tanai enlarged and modernized his ancestral country *palagio* in Soffiano, not far from Florence, adding an important vaulted *sala* and two superimposed loggias that look out over interior courtyard gardens (fig. 91). The lower of

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629. MPAP, 184, fols. 100r–110v, cited in Philip Mattox, “Domestic Sacral Space in the Florentine Renaissance Palace,” *Renaissance Studies* 20, no. 5 (2006): 670.

630. The loggia pilasters however, are carved, not intarsiated, as were the stalls of both Tanai’s home chapel and the Santo Spirito choir (supra n. 52).

631. Kent, *Household and Lineage*, 242, 244. Thus, Giovanni Rucellai with the cooperation of his *consorteria* built a piazza and “common loggia ... for our family’s honor, to be used for happy and for sad occasions.” Kent, “The Rucellai Family and Its Loggia,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 35 (1972): n. 42.

632. Gavitt notes that the loggias of charitable organizations in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Florence built upon the symbolism of kinship protection and solidarity carried by the family loggia. “Corporate Beneficence and Communal Well-being” in Crum and Paoletti, *Renaissance Florence*, 155.

633. No loggia is mentioned in the 1519 inventory of the house. Mattox, “Domestic Sacral Space,” 670. Tanai claimed an ancestral family loggia near the Ponte della Carraia and sold it to Tommaso Soderini. In addition, during Tanai’s lifetime, the Nerli maintained at Ponte a Greve a charitable hospital fronted by a loggia consisting of stone columns supporting a wooden lattice. Gamurrini, “Famiglia de’Nerli,” 16–17.

these two loggias is fronted by an arched colonnade *a l'antica*.<sup>634</sup> Thus, the Nerli villa in Soffiano allies an arched colonnade, an L-shaped structure around an interior courtyard and a location in the countryside, outside of, but not far from, the city of Florence. Indeed the facade of the Nerli country palace bears a resemblance to the facade of the palazzo in Filippino's altarpiece, notably the six arched windows above a large arched doorway.<sup>635</sup> It is thus possible that the tree-topped hill featured in Filippino's painting, as well as the loggia itself, may be associated with the Nerli estate in Soffiano and its surrounding countryside. In any case, Filippino's sacred loggia is clearly freighted with a rich network of symbolic associations, alluding to the wealth and patrician status of the Nerlis, the antiquity of their line and, as well, to their piety. The architecture and decoration of both the foreground loggia and the window above it may thus reference both the Nerlis' commission of a private chapel within their city palazzo and the family's patrician lineage manifested in the loggia as architectural form and as a feature of their ancestral *palagio* outside Florence.

The multiplicity of these possible references supports the notion that the altarpiece's foreground, located in the Nerli chapel at Santo Spirito, and the mid-ground space consisting of the palazzo, its courtyard and perhaps even the adjoining hillside, are linked through their joint affiliation with the Nerli family. This is true although, as we

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634. Amanda Lillie, "Memory of Place: Luogo and Lineage in the Fifteenth-Century Florentine Countryside," in *Art, Memory and Family in Renaissance Florence*, ed. Giovanni Ciappelli and Patricia Lee Rubin (Cambridge, 2000), figs. 64, 197, and n. 14. Lillie notes that Tanai's *castato* returns do not refer to work at the villa. However, she believes that the capitals of the loggia and details of interior stonework indicate that the additions were indeed made in the late fifteenth century.

635. The facade of the *palagio* is interrupted in Vannucci and Fabbroni's drawing by an outcropping of other buildings. The unadorned and somewhat old-fashioned integrity of the altarpiece's palace facade is certainly more appropriate to Tanai's country estate outside Florence than to a late quattrocento Florentine palace.

have seen, these spaces are segregated in terms of their rhetorical mode of address and the nature of their beholder's reception. These linkages are reflected pictorially by correspondences in hue. Thus, the yellow-green and golds of the mid-ground landscape reproduce the gold-tinged lining of Mary's mantle and the loggia wall above the arcade. Similarly, the reds that predominate in the loggia and figure, almost certainly, in the stained-glass window above, reappear vividly in the palazzo courtyard on the groom in his Nerli colors and the paternal figure in his red *lucco*.

## 5. The Street

The reds in the courtyard alert us, in turn, to the bright, distinct notes of red scattered among the muted tones of the suburban street.<sup>636</sup> Filippino's street has been specifically located by several scholars in the neighborhood of San Frediano, associated with the Nerli during the Middle Ages.<sup>637</sup> The fact is, however, that Tanai's palazzo was situated in the Borgo San Jacopo, at a considerable distance from the San Frediano gate.<sup>638</sup> Nor was the San Frediano neighborhood itself associated with the monastery and church of Santo Spirito. As Eckstein notes, the inhabitants of San Frediano, an area roughly commensurate with the *gonfalone* of the Green Dragon, gravitated toward the

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636. The pervasiveness of the color red in the panel was noted by Rubin (*Images and Identity*, 220): "The use of the color red pulls the eye around and between the figures, employing the liturgical color of love, compassion and charity to do so."

637. Bridgeman ("Filippino Lippi's Nerli Altarpiece," 670) supports her view that the panel celebrates Tanai's participation in the Florentine embassy to Charles VIII on the street's identification as the Borgo San Frediano, which culminates in the San Frediano gate. See also Eckstein, "Neighborhood as Microcosm," 229: "The Florentine diplomat showed himself in his native neighborhood among his family and neighbors." Rubin (*Images and Identity*, 216) states somewhat more cautiously that the altarpiece setting is "based on the neighboring area of Borgo San Frediano."

638. Nelson, "La posizione dei ritratti," 466. Bridgeman herself suggests as much. "Filippino Lippi's Nerli Altarpiece," 668 n. 5.

church of the Carmine, as the Nerli themselves had done before their years of exile.<sup>639</sup> In addition, Nelson has questioned whether the gate in Filippino's panel actually represents the Porta San Frediano, which presents a different appearance in the late fifteenth-century renditions of Florence (fig. 24).<sup>640</sup> More significant than any of these considerations, however, is the fact—never mentioned in the scholarship—that Filippino's "street" is located outside, not inside, the prominently displayed gate and walls of the depicted city. Indeed, its mellow palette of yellows, cream and rose—punctuated by touches of the loggia's crimson—contrasts greatly with the grays and rusts of the city itself. At the same time, the street is pictorially dominated by the looming stone gate whose ochre hue is reflected in the yellows and sands of the low houses and shops. Through this gate people come and go into the city, as the woman walking under its arch, a basket on her head, indicates. The street, like the palazzo, thus appears to represent an intermediary ground that bears some resemblance to the city, but is not enclosed within its walls and does not partake of it.

## 6. The City

Although Bridgeman's thesis relies upon the assumption that the city depicted in the altarpiece is Florence, she never actually asserts that identification, and for good reason. Filippino's city lacks any of the commonplace visual cues that allowed fifteenth-century Florentines to recognize portrayals of their city. These visual signs include invariably the Duomo with Brunelleschi's bulging, rose-colored dome, usually Giotto's campanile with the small squat Baptistery beside it, and when space allowed, the square

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639. Burke, *Changing Patrons*, 64.

640. Nelson, "La posizione dei ritratti," 466.

and crenellated block of the Palazzo Vecchio. This abbreviated skyline encapsulates Florence in Ghirlandaio's 1482–83 fresco of Saint Zenobius for the Palazzo Vecchio's Sala dei Gigli (fig. 92). Piero del Pollaiuolo's view of Florence in his mid-1490 Annunciation (fig. 93) includes the same elements.<sup>641</sup> These images indicate that any artist who wished to cue the viewer that the city he had depicted was Florence had only to use that city's group of recognizable monuments. In this regard, Filippino appears to have studiously avoided including any building that resembled these monuments. Moreover, while Florence is situated in a valley and bisected by a river, the Arno, Filippino's city climbs a steep hill, flanked to one side by the still water of a moat or canal and to the other by the sea.

If the city in the Nerli altarpiece is not Florence, may we say that it represents a generic Italian *cità*?<sup>642</sup> If so, as we have already seen, it is painfully dark, rough textured and crowded, bristling with towers but boasting, apparently, only one church near the mid-ground entrance gate. The city backdrop of Filippino's tondo The Holy Family with the Young Saint John the Baptist and Saint Margaret (fig. 94) and his representation of Jerusalem in the roughly contemporary Meeting at the Golden Gate are also tower heavy, but in both cases the balanced placement of the towers and the use of creamy limestone rather than brick give the cityscapes greater spaciousness and a lighter feel. The cityscape that forms the backdrop of the Miracle of the Crucifix in the Carafa Chapel (fig. 95) presents us again with creamy walls offering a variety of architectural shapes, contrasts of sunlit and shaded planes, a glimpse of a courtyard garden and a tower topped

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641. See also the workshop of Verrocchio's Madonna dei Cipressi in Grassano. Goldthwaite, The Building of Renaissance Florence: An Economic and Social History (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1980), frontispiece.

642. Nelson, "La posizione dei ritratti," 466.

with a cross. It seems that the particularly somber and oppressive quality of the Nerli *città* is an exception in Filippino's contemporary work. Another striking feature, mentioned earlier, are the multiple entryways that render this city not only accessible but virtually unavoidable. Finally, from the viewer's vantage point in the loggia, it is not clear where—or if—the city ends. Progressing from left to right, the moat, ramparts, gate, and the horizon line of the sea mark the boundary closest to the viewer. In the distance, however, the towering squarish shapes depicted behind the figure of Saint Martin might be cliffs or towers. Further to the right, hazy rounded shapes that appear to be vegetation crown a hill; yet a tower with its spire emerges from among them, suggesting the presence of yet another—or perhaps the same—city.

The likely source of Filippino's complex geographic schema is the specifically Augustinian vision of a universe divided between a City of Man and a City of God. Augustine's dichotomy is a complex one, in which each of the two "cities" is, to some extent, associated with an actual city, while referring as well to a dispersed collection of individuals that belong to one or the other camp. Thus, Augustine describes both Cain and Romulus and Remus as the founders of actual earthly cities. At the same time, Cain is understood to be the founder of the City of Man; that is, of all the collectivity of individuals whose self-love and rejection of God keeps them in a state of sin.<sup>643</sup> The City of God, for its part, is associated with the Heavenly City, or the Heavenly Jerusalem, where the blessed will abide after the Last Judgment.<sup>644</sup> It is also linked to the institution

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643. Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, trans. and ed. R.W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 600, 607.

644. *Ibid.*, 593.

of the Church.<sup>645</sup> At the same time, however, Augustine is clearly thinking of individual types and their participation in human history, the one type following Cain and marked with sin; the other following Abel and blessed by God's grace. Despite the Church's influence, the City of Man holds sway over the earth, while the City of God remains "on pilgrimage in this world."<sup>646</sup> Augustine makes frequent reference to the inhabitants of the City of God as pilgrims, the object of the pilgrimage being God himself or more broadly his "City on High": "Part of this City [the City of God], the part which consists of us, is on pilgrimage; part of it, the part which consists of the angels, helps us on our way."<sup>647</sup> "The line of descent stretches from Noah on to Abraham ... the course of the most glorious City which is on pilgrimage in this world and looks for a native land on high."<sup>648</sup>

As we noted, the city in the background of the Nerli altarpiece with its moat and ramparts is both set apart as a distinct space from the foreground and mid-ground of the painting and, at the same time, is assertively accessible. In addition to the towering entrance gate on the right, three arched doorways on the left lead into the city's domain. From his station in the loggia, the beholder receives the impression that all roads lead into the city, the path leading up the hill on the left as well as the street leading up to the gate. At the same time, Filippino's atmospheric *sfumato* creates the suggestion that the city goes on forever, as if it were universal. In that respect, Filippino's city is a portrayal of

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645. In one early passage, in which he equates the City of God with the Church, Augustine appears to be saying that some resistant and sinful members of the City of God on earth will not belong to the City of God in Heaven. More generally, Church participation that is limited to baptism and the partaking of the sacraments is not sufficient for inclusion in the City of God. Ibid., 335, 524, 920.

646. Ibid., 45.

647. Ibid., 381.

648. Ibid., 620.

the core metaphor that underlies Augustine's City of God, a metaphor whereby the whole earthly realm and man's human condition are assimilated to the "the City of this World"<sup>649</sup> or "the earthly city."<sup>650</sup>

This universal city is, as we saw, a harsh environment of rough brick painted in grays, blacks and dark reds, bristling with high towers, none of which, significantly, bears a cross. This plethora of high towers conforms to Augustine's mingled descriptions of the Tower of Babel and the city of Babylon, both specific manifestations of the City of Man: "Although it was not finished on the great scale which their arrogant impiety had in mind ... their plan provided for an enormous height, to 'reach the sky,' as was said; whether this referred to a single tower ... or to all the towers denoted by the collective singular."<sup>651</sup> Pride is the salient character of the earthly city, "a city which aims at dominion, which holds nations in enslavement, but is itself dominated by that very lust of domination."<sup>652</sup> In describing the character of the two cities, Augustine contrasts pride—the beginning of all sin<sup>653</sup>—and self-love against the love of God:

The earthly city glories in itself, the Heavenly City glories in the Lord.... The earthly lifts up its head in its own glory, the Heavenly City says to its God: "My glory, you lift up my head..." The one city loves its own strength shown in its powerful leaders; the other says to its God, "I will love you, my lord, my strength."<sup>654</sup>

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649. Ibid., 5.

650. Ibid., 593.

651. Ibid., 657.

652. Ibid., 5.

653. Ibid., 477.

654. Ibid., 593.



Filippino's city with its multitude of towers thus reflects the pride and the lust for power that are the earthly city's dominant themes. At the same time, the darkly chaotic effect of the city's jumbled buildings accords with Augustine's identification of the City of Man with Babylon, a city whose name means, in fact, "confusion."<sup>655</sup> As we saw, only one building within the city resembles a church. In contrast with the towers that surround it, that church is of low stature and located close to the city gate—in other words, to the world beyond. Its facade, unlike that of the city's other buildings, is illuminated by the sunlight that rakes through the painting's mid-ground from the left. The presence of this church conforms to Augustine's overall notion that the sinful and the blessed are mingled on earth. At the same time, the absence of a cross ensures that the presence of the church does not detract from the overall character of the city.

## **7. The City of God**

If the urban vista in the background of the Nerli altarpiece is a representation of the City of Man, the heavenly court assembled in the painting's foreground represents its opposite pole, the City of God, in which Mary and the Christ Child sit enthroned. We noted earlier the segregation of the foreground loggia from the mid-ground and background topography, a segregation accomplished by the literal barrier formed by the loggia pilasters and the figure of Mary, by the loggia's elevation above the suburban landscape beyond it and by the ambiguity of its spatial relationship to the palazzo courtyard. The City of God is thus conceived here as the Heavenly City, governed by Holy Wisdom and inhabited by the saints and the blessed, including Tanai de Nerli and his wife Nanna. Indeed, the gaze prominently exchanged between the Virgin and Nanna

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655. Ibid.

demonstrates pictorially Mary's acknowledgment of Nanna's presence among the blessed and thus confirms her salvation.

At the same time, the City of God as depicted here does not exist entirely in an otherworldly realm since it is linked—most obviously by the dove clasped above Mary—to the Nerli chapel within the church of Santo Spirito and, perhaps as well, to the private chapel maintained by the Nerli within their palazzo. Thus, within the geography of the panel, Filippino emphatically locates the church and convent of Santo Spirito outside the City of Man and within the City of God. This citing of the Augustinian Hermits' paramount Florentine convent should, of course, be understood as a visual metaphor that describes the character of that convent's spiritual life. At the same time, the spatial linkages of Santo Spirito and the Nerli with the City of God reflect Augustine's own complex vision of that city as, not only the Heavenly Jerusalem, but also as blessed individuals and their holy institutions in pilgrimage through the City of Man. Augustine, as we saw, understood the role of the Church as the institutional face of the City of God on earth, despite the varying proclivities of its members. In turn, Filippino's inclusion of Santo Spirito within the City of God reflects the order's own self-understanding as an institutional participant in the City of God on earth. Thus, Jordan of Quedlinburg asserted in his Vitas Fratrum:

This religion's holy community is able to be that city, that is, a union of cities, about which it is said in the Psalm, Glorious things are said of you, City of God. Glorious things, I say, are told about your origin which you once had from your father, namely blessed Augustine; even more glorious things, however, are said about your confirmation, which you have from your mother, that is, the holy universal church.<sup>656</sup>

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656. Jordan of Quedlinburg, Liber Vitas Fratrum 1, 14, cited in Saak, High Way to Heaven, 281.

Jordan's metaphor describes the Augustinian Order as an exemplum of the City of God here on earth, exalted not only by its own merits but also by virtue of its affiliations with Augustine himself and with the broader institution of the Church.

### **8. The Pilgrims**

What are we to make of the middle ground, which the panel so clearly defines as “outside” both the city and the sacred loggia (fig. 96)? We noted above that in that intermediary zone, which includes the palazzo and the street beyond it, classical ornament characteristic of the grand style is replaced by anecdote, more appropriate to the middle style. The incidents—dogs meeting, a child running by, a groom preparing a horse for riding as a father embraces his child—are displayed, apparently, in all their random ordinariness. Describing this scene, Strocchia wrote about “the texture” of “everyday urban life.”<sup>657</sup> The emphasis, however, should be laid on “life.” The inhabitants of palazzo and street are toiling through the everydayness that is life itself, while the loggia's occupants are gathered in Mary's heavenly court. The radically sequestered character of the loggia is that of the afterlife, separated from the street by height, distance and indeterminate, ambiguous transitions. The terrain that extends beyond the loggia, on the other hand, belongs to these who are alive on this earth; some are citizens of the City of Man, others, in Augustine's words, are “citizens of the Eternal City, on the pilgrimage in this world.”<sup>658</sup>

At the same time, like the loggia, the street and the palazzo are located outside the walls of the City of Man. Furthermore, two of the figures who reside in this middle zone, the Nerli “father” embracing his child in front of his palazzo and a woman on the rooftop

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657. Sharon Strocchia, “Theaters of Everyday Life,” in Crum and Paoletti, Renaissance Florence, 77.

658. Augustine, City of God, 600.

terrace of a modest house nearby, wear the crimson cloth so prevalent in the foreground. Filippino has given us yet an even more salient sign of “the City of God on pilgrimage.” As the “father” bends down to kiss his child, his broad-brimmed black hat stands out prominently against the palazzo facade. Bridgeman described this headgear as a traveling hat.<sup>659</sup> Yet, if the figure were setting out on or had just returned from a journey, we would expect to see some form of luggage. The hat worn by Filippino’s father figure, over his bright red *cufia*, is shallow at the crown and entirely black. In one of the frescoes that decorate the Oratory of the Buonomini di San Martino, Housing the Pilgrims, the young male pilgrim wears a similar black, broad-brimmed hat, decorated with a cockle shell that refers to the specific destination of his pilgrimage (fig. 97). The figure of Christ as pilgrim, met by Dominican friars in Fra Angelico’s lunette from the cloister of San Marco, wears the same hat slung over his shoulder (fig. 98). Thus, it certainly seems as if this Nerli “father” is wearing a hat that confers on him the role of pilgrim, a role appropriate to a citizen of the City of God on pilgrimage on this earth. In turn, if the *paterfamilias* is a pilgrim engaged in a spiritual journey, the palazzo courtyard vignette should refer not only to a family leave-taking or reunion, but also to an underlying spiritual narrative played out within the fluid and complex geography of Augustine’s City of God.

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659. Bridgeman, “Filippino Lippi’s Nerli Altarpiece,” 668. The broad-brimmed traveling hat in Renaissance Italy was most often made of straw, sometimes lined and trimmed with fabric. Jaqueline Herald, Renaissance Dress in Italy 1400–1500 (London: Bell & Hyman, 1981), 212, fig. 60.

## C. Narrating Charity

### 1. The Intercessory Narrative and the Patrons

From the distinct spatial worlds set out in Filippino's panel and from the figures that occupy them emerge narratives that offer the viewer avenues of access to the constellation of values with which the altarpiece is concerned. As we have seen, the actors in the foreground space are disposed with a hierarchical and symmetrical rigor that ensures the composition's underlying stability. In this, Filippino sets out his City of God as a traditional quattrocento *sacra conversazione*, deploying the Madonna, Christ Child and attendant saints as actors in an intercessory drama that includes the beholder.

The insertion of the kneeling figures of the patron and his wife certainly reinforces the symmetry of the composition, so characteristic of the earlier Santo Spirito altarpieces. It is also, of course, responsive to the underlying intercessory rhetoric of the altarpiece. Whereas, ordinarily, with a *sacra conversazione*, the intercessory relationship between saint and donor unfolded in the actual space between the image and that donor, in this case the donors are included in the altarpiece and displayed as the objects of their patron saints' active intercession. Thus, Martin has placed his hand encouragingly on the back of Tanai's head, while Catherine gestures for Mary's benefit in Nanna's direction, her other hand hovering protectively over her. Yet, Filippino's narrative inclusion of the donors within the interactions taking place in the loggia appears to some degree at odds with the profile pose of these donors, their placement in the immediate foreground and the black clothing that sets them apart from the other figures in the loggia.

The patron's profile pose appears to have been a firm convention in Italian art by the late fifteenth century. Both Filippino and Tanai would have been familiar with two

other well-known instances of chapel decoration that include full-length depictions of the donor and his wife: Masaccio's 1425 Trinity fresco at Santa Maria Novella and Ghirlandaio's frescoes for the Sassetti chapel in Santa Trinita (figs. 99 and 100). In both cases, the patrons are depicted in strict profile in an isolated location in the foreground. On the other hand, Filippino's recently completed Annunciation altarpiece for the Carafa chapel placed Cardinal Carafa in a three-quarter rather than a strict profile pose, and at the center rather than the foreground of the scene. The differences between the three works mentioned above suggest a slow loosening of restrictions on the representation of patrons in a private chapel context. Thus, at Santo Spirito, Filippino was able to adopt the Carafa posture—face in full profile and body in three-quarter profile—in his portrait of Tanai. In addition, while both patrons are situated in the immediate foreground of the painting, tucked into the corners as it were, neither of them is isolated from the action, as in the Lenzi and Sassetti frescoes. On the contrary, both are clearly the subject of the attention of their individual patron saint.

The ambiguous existential status of Tanai and Nanna within the loggia space is epitomized by their mode of dress. They both wear black, a color that carried connotations of invisibility or nonexistence in late quattrocento Florence.<sup>660</sup> At the same time, Tanai holds his bright red *cappuccio*, while the fur lining of his garment, his white *camicia* and his dark crimson silk sleeves are exposed. As the distinction between Tanai and Nanna's clothing indicates, the conventions governing the representation of female patrons were far more restrictive: an expressionless profile and unadorned black clothing

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660. Frick, Dressing Renaissance Florence, 174–75.

appear to have been an unvarying norm.<sup>661</sup> The relative conservatism in the presentation of Nerli patrons may be further explained by the novelty—at Santo Spirito in particular—of actually including the donors within the body of the panel itself. Patrons, both male and female, do appear in many of the church's altarpiece predellas.<sup>662</sup> In addition, in Del Mazziere's Madonna and Child with Saints Bartholomew and Nicholas of Bari, two male patrons are inserted as profile busts *en abîme* in the guise, respectively, of Saints Bernard and Jerome (fig. 9). The use of profile busts and religious personae in that case suggests that the friars of Santo Spirito or the church *opera* may well have raised objections to inserting the full and undisguised figures of Tanai and Nanna into the altarpiece.

Dressed almost entirely in black and presented in profile, both patrons were in danger of creating the effect of dark silhouettes applied to the surface plane of the image, rather than of substantial bodies taking up space within the loggia and interacting with the surrounding figures. Filippino appears to have expended considerable effort to mitigate this effect. On the left side of the painting, an unspecified black column or pillar emerges from behind Saint Martin and rises up beyond the loggia arches, naturalized to some degree by a shelf on which the saint has placed his miter and a book. Although the figure of Saint Martin separates this black pillar from the black figure of Tanai kneeling at the saint's feet, it is evident that its width corresponds almost exactly with that of the patron. On the other side of the panel, above Saint Catherine's shoulder, the rightmost arch of the

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661. See generally Paola Tinagli, Women in Italian Renaissance Art: Gender, Representation and Identity (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 47–83. The only evolution in this regard seems to have been the shedding of the tentlike black *mantello*, in which Lenzi's wife is draped in Masaccio's Trinity. Although matrons of the upper classes wore the *mantello* in public throughout the fifteenth century, Mona Nanna, like Nera Sassetti at Santa Trinita, has replaced the *mantello* with a plain *gamurra*.

662. This is the case, for instance, with Cosimo Rosselli's early Madonna and Child with Saints Thomas and Augustine and of Del Mazziere's Trinity with Saints Mary Magdalene and Catherine of Alexandria (fig. 7). The altar frontal decoration of the Madonna and Child with Saints Matthew and Jerome by the Master of the Santo Spirito *conversazione* also includes the donor and his wife.

loggia opens onto the dark vestibule that we described earlier. The interior of this vestibule turns darker as it descends behind Catherine toward the black-clothed figure of Nanna. Here again, the width of the dark vestibule and that of Nanna are broadly similar. As a result, what we see when we first look at the panel are vertical areas of low value that depict spatially appropriate pictorial events—the shelf and the vestibule. Because it is virtually black, this loose vertical inner frame assimilates itself to the black-clothed donors below it and has the effect of pulling these donors into the spatial and coloristic naturalism of the panel as a whole. Filippino attempted to further naturalize this effort at integration by interposing on either side the high-value figures of Saints Martin and Catherine between the dark “columns” and the black-clad donors. As a result, despite the flattening effect of the patrons’ location—at the extreme left and right foreground of the panel—profile posture and black clothing, the artist succeeded to a remarkable degree in avoiding a silhouette effect and incorporating the patrons into the multidimensional space and interpersonal dynamic of the loggia.

In his discussion of the Nerli altarpiece, Nelson brought to bear a wealth of scholarship devoted to the depiction of women in Renaissance Florence to the task of examining Filippino’s representation of the patron and his wife.<sup>663</sup> He concluded that the particular differences between Filippino’s treatment of Tanai and Nanna were commonplace in quattrocento altarpieces that include donor couples: Placed in the more honorable position, to the Virgin’s right, Tanai is very slightly taller than his wife. As we have seen, his black clothing is alleviated by elegant details, while Nanna’s sober attire

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663. Nelson’s underlying concern is the construction of social personae by both artist and patron, following a mode of investigation suggested by, among others, Patricia Simons in her seminal article “Portraiture, Portrayal, and Idealization: Ambiguous Individualism in Representations of Renaissance Women,” in Brown, *Language and Images*, 263–301.



robs her of shape and sexual presence. Tanai is presented in three-quarter profile, as opposed to Nanna's full profile; in addition his raised head and lifted hand convey an emotional quality to his involvement that is absent from his wife's expressionless composure.<sup>664</sup>

On the other hand, Nelson does not seem to have taken into consideration the ways in which the portrait of Nanna is more volumetric than her husband's. In fact, her body actually occupies more of the panel's space than his does. Although the uniformity of Nanna's clothing is inherently flattening, Filippino made use of her emphatic stability and the plumpness of her chest and shoulders to create a rounded figure whose physical presence, particularly in her distinctively large hands and full cheeks, is discernable. Moreover, her linen veil, a sheer fabric that is nonetheless substantial, suggests texture, weight and—through its multiple layers—an underlying physical reality beyond the picture plane. All these features reinforce the figure's effect of real presence.

Nanna's portrait is the product of conventions governing the depiction of female patrons in Florentine art.<sup>665</sup> While men of means felt encouraged to commission portraits of their daughters and wives, they had to rely upon the persona fashioned by these

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664. Nelson wished, in his own words, to determine to what extent distinctions between Filippino's representation of Tanai and that of Nanna reflected contemporary "conceptions of the relationship of men and women." "Le posizione de ritratti," 459. This framework is problematic in that it encourages the investigator to perceive in Filippino's Nerli portraits only those aspects that are compatible with our knowledge of Florentine gender relations and to ignore features that are at odds with our understanding. Thus, Nelson states that Tanai's mouth, like that of Saint Martin, is half-open as if he were about to speak. A closer observation, however, reveals that both husband and wife have their lips closed.

665. Patricia Simons, "Women in Frames: The Gaze, the Eye, the Profile in Renaissance Portraiture," in Broude and Garrard, *Expanding Discourse*, 41, 45. Within the discourse of gender in the upper classes in Renaissance Florence, the dichotomy that opposed a culture of public display to an ethos of protective concealment appears to have played an important role in the representations of women in art.

portraits to insulate the woman portrayed from threatening scrutiny.<sup>666</sup> The use of the flattening and distancing profile thus mitigated the portrait's effect of real presence. Within a religious context, the use of plain black clothing, together with the strict profile pose, serves the same protective purpose in more radical terms—by virtually “disappearing” the image's signified, the female patron herself, from the image.<sup>667</sup> Thus, the composite pictorial sign that is the “portrait” of Nanna references only a very small number of attributes—her identity, the rudiments of her appearance and her adherence to class and gender-specific ideals of gravity and composure. In other words, Filippino's representation of Nanna has limited value as a signifier for a particular female individual, functioning to some extent, to paraphrase Patricia Simmons, as “an absence conveying an absence.”<sup>668</sup>

The very fact that the sign functions to conceal that signified allows it to say a great deal about the ideals that underlie that concealment. Filippino's portrait of Nanna supports a value-laden discourse highlighting integrity, seriousness of purpose and self-control; in other words, it functions to construct an image of a specifically female virtue.<sup>669</sup> In the case of Nanna, moreover, Filippino made use of the pictorial context—

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666. By the use of the term *persona* here, I wish to highlight the personal and temperamental aspects of the pictorial identity of the upper-class women portrayed in fifteenth-century Florentine art. These women were displayed as desirable objects, and, at the very same time, as protected both by their social status and by the crucial aspects of their personality that comprised their virtue and shielded their interior selves – chastity, dignity, modesty and piety. The notion of an inviolate female interiority merged physical chastity with an impregnable mental and moral inner self. The frequently cited paradigm for such a portrait is Ghirlandaio's 1488 *Giovanna degli Albizzi Tornabuoni* --in the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum in Madrid-- in which the beauty of the sitter itself is depicted as a glistening and adamant physical cuirass.

667. As we noted earlier, black was a non-color in fifteenth-century Florence. The use by upper-class matrons, when venturing out in public, of the required black *mantello* ensured their quasi-invisibility. *Supra*, n. 94.

668. Simmons, “Women in Frames,” 51.

669. These qualities were all at variance with pervasive fears of loquacious, frivolous and dangerously over-exposed women. Alison Wright, “The Memory of Faces: Representational Choices in Fifteenth-

the sacred loggia, the presence of Saint Catherine of Alexandria and the Virgin—to inflect that depiction of virtue with a specifically religious character. Kneeling at Catherine and Mary’s feet, hands joined holding her rosary, eyes on Mary’s face, Filippino’s Nanna conveys an impression of single-minded devotion, while her black clothing takes on the character of a self-denying piety particularly appropriate for her social class and age.

Striking exempla of such gendered religious praxis, did, in fact, exist in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italy.<sup>670</sup> For instance, Elena of Udine (1395–1458), from a noble family and the widow of a wealthy merchant, withdrew from society following her husband’s death. She led a life of increasing piety, and, during her last years, joined the Mantellate, the Third Order of the Augustinian Hermits. Significantly, the several *vitae* written about Elena note that, following her husband’s death, she cut her hair and threw it, along with all the jewels that she had worn during her married life, onto her husband’s grave.<sup>671</sup> The devotional milieu suggested by the lives of such women should surely be taken into account in understanding how the salient features of Nanna’s portrait would have been read. The sacred character of the pictorial context allowed the artist to play upon Nanna’s plain black garb with its suggestion of penitential asceticism, her full profile with its connotations of virtue, her hands joined in prayer and her rosary,

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Century Florentine Portraiture,” in Ciappelli and Rubin, *Art, Memory and Family*, 88. On virtue and the profile pose, see Brown, *Virtue and Beauty*, 14.

670. Daniel Bornstein, *Women and Religion in Medieval and Renaissance Italy*, ed. Daniel Bornstein and Roberto Busconi, trans. Margery J. Schneider (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 3–4. Examples include the fourteenth-century Florentine recluse Umiliana dei Cerchi and Francesca Bussa dei Ponziani in fifteenth-century Rome.

671. Alison Knowles Frazier, *Possible Lives: Authors and Saints in Renaissance Italy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 221–67. The most elaborate of Elena’s *vitae*, written by the humanist Giacomo da Udine, imagines Elena in heaven, explaining her various ascetic practices as specific forms of penitence for the jewelry and elaborate hairstyles she wore, with her husband’s encouragement, during his lifetime (*ibid.*, 257).

expressive of piety, and the exchange of glances with Mary, all in order to convey an intense and focused spirituality.

Equally significant to the beholder's reception of the Nerli donor portraits is Nanna's station to the Virgin's left. Nelson correctly identifies that "female" location as inherently subordinate. Nevertheless, Filippino's composition directs our attention to that side of the painting, actually foregrounding it within the viewer's process of reception. Because the area to the Virgin's left is populated with only two figures rather than four, as on the right, these figures are more immediately distinguishable and identifiable. In addition, the flow of light emanating from front and left of the panel falls more brightly onto the "female side" of the painting, illuminating the duo of Catherine and Nanna. Finally, the monumental and centrally stationed figure of the Virgin looks not to her right, but down to her left at Nanna, and in so doing encourages the beholder to do the same.

Nanna's exchange of glances with Mary, also occurring to the Virgin's left, is itself prominent enough to attract the beholder's attention to the right side of the painting. Filippino has underlined the importance of Nanna and Mary's visual communication by providing a structural cue. Beyond the loggia, the contour of a distant hill forms a pale, oblique line that descends towards the lower left of the panel (fig. 101). The line is interrupted by Mary's body; but it reappears in touches of white among the rose-colored buildings of the street, running parallel to the slope of the mid-ground hillside. The same line continues along the painting's right orthogonal, formed by the base of the palazzo façade, the base trim of the loggia pilaster and the curve of Catherine's creamy arm, which points to Nanna's profile. Within the loggia, this rough trajectory runs parallel to

the invisible line that joins the eyes of Nanna and Mary.<sup>672</sup> It seems as if Filippino has set out his figures, delineated the fall of light within the panel and structured elements of his composition so as to draw the beholder towards the female side of the panel and, specifically, towards the figure of Nanna and the exchange of gazes between Nanna and the Virgin.

The communication between Mary and Nanna partakes of the broader pictorial and narrative context that is Filippino's *invenzione* in this scene. One problem in Nelson's approach to the Nerli's portraits is that it isolates these donors from a setting in which they are very much embedded, and in so doing ignores the image's own construction of gender relations within the specificities of the Nerli marriage.<sup>673</sup> Nelson is certainly correct in noting Nanna's immobility and the contrast between that immobility and her husband's animated face and expressive gesture of surprise. However, as we have seen, because Nanna is not presented in isolation, we are likely to read her expression as intent, purposive and focused on Mary's face. What Filippino's pictorial context accomplishes here is the creation of an inner life, defined by the gesture of Nanna's hands joined in prayer and the object of her attentive gaze, Mary.

Around the stolid profile of Nanna and the alert figure of Tanai, Filippino has woven a complex intercessory narrative, which, once again, makes use of the conventions of donor portraiture—in this case the profile view of Tanai's face as well as the restricted

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672. This oblique directive line, which thus runs through the painting from center background to left foreground, is best perceived by a beholder who studies Filippino's original panel from some distance. Small-scale reproductions do not fully convey its effect.

673. This is not to say that decontextualized readings of patrons' portraits did not occur in the Renaissance. Filippino's painting was subjected to a wide variety of audiences who constructed their own varied readings. Our first documented source on the Nerli altarpiece, the Anonimo Magliabecchiano, noted that Filippino "fece una tavola daltare a Tanai de' Nerli, nella quale lo trasse al naturale insieme con Madonna <Pippa> sua donna." The portraits of Tanai and his wife, independent of the *tavola d'altare* itself, were clearly of paramount interest to the writer. Nelson, "La posizione dei ritratti," 460.

presentation of Nanna in demeanor and dress. As we have seen, the altarpiece predella bears the words “Virgo Dei Genitrix Intercede Pro Nostra Omnium Que Salute.” The inscription tells us, the beholders, to pray, while immediately above, the altarpiece shows us that prayer in action. The one person praying in Filippino’s heavenly loggia is Nanna, her hands joined, holding her dangling rosary, her eyes fixed on the Virgin’s face, inwardly uttering the words inscribed on the predella. We can surmise this not only from her posture and expression, but also because Mary, seated with her body oriented toward the left, in the direction of the donor, pivots to gaze back at her, acknowledging her presence and her prayer.

Mary’s response to Nanna is one important link in the chain of gestural statements and responses set out by Filippino. Although the loggia composition retains an underlying static, even architectonic, character, typical of a conventional *sacra conversazione*, all its figures, with the exception of Nanna, have just completed or are engaged in some form of motion. The Baptist, kneeling at Mary’s feet, has lifted up his cross so that the Christ Child reaches down to play with it. Saint Martin leans slightly forward to look at this interplay, gesturing towards it with his left hand. On the other side of the panel, Saint Catherine, inclining her head toward Mary, rotates and gestures in Nanna’s direction. The supremely graceful calligraphy of Catherine’s movements, her bending hands and the widely swirling sleeves of her loose silver overdress are of very much of a piece with her elaborate coiffure whose knotted veil ripples back over her neck.

In his Della Pittura, Alberti instructed: “The painter wishing to express life in things, will make every part in motion—but in motion he will keep loveliness and

grace.”<sup>674</sup> He went on, in a celebrated passage, to write of “the movement in hair, locks of hair, ... and robes,” which “should all be moderated and sweet.”<sup>675</sup> While Filippino’s Saint Catherine epitomizes Alberti’s formula with her floating veils and rolling sleeves, the movements performed by all the loggia figures are marked by a quality of moderation and sweetness, which allows them to retain the slow rhythm appropriate to the court of heaven. What is key, Alberti continued, is that the grace and charm of the painting “will capture the eye of whatever learned or unlearned person is looking at it and will move his soul.”<sup>676</sup> Alberti ties motion to loveliness on the one hand and to emotion on the other, both the emotions of the characters in the *istoria* and the responsive emotions of the beholder. Filippino’s foreground scene, which is full of motion, is also full of emotion. Indeed, we have already noted the relationship between the loggia composition and the highly ornamented rhetorical grand style, whose very purpose, Augustine has told us, is to move the beholder.

At the same time, the movements depicted by Filippino conform to Alberti’s insistence that “all bodies ought to move according to what is ordered in the *istoria*.”<sup>677</sup> In this case, the gestures performed by the foreground figures—pivoting around the immobile silhouette of the praying Nanna—display their emotive responses to one another and, in so doing, describe an intercessory *istoria* that fosters, in turn, the affective response of the beholder: The Virgin, whose body is oriented slightly to her right, facing the patron Tanai, has just turned her head to respond to Nanna’s prayer and to the

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674. Alberti, *On Painting*, 74.

675. *Ibid.*, 81.

676. *Ibid.*, 75.

677. *Ibid.*, 78.

entreaties of Saint Catherine, whose hands hover to either side of Nanna's lifted face directing Mary's and our attention towards her. The Madonna looks down at Nanna gently, but with immense weariness, a mood suggested by her heavy eyelids and the limp arms with which she holds the Christ Child. Clearly, before she looked over at her suppliant, she noticed the Christ Child's grasp of the wicker cross held up by the Baptist. Her clairvoyance has told her that his sleepy play is, in fact, a pledge of his coming self-sacrifice.<sup>678</sup> Despite Mary's sorrow, the exchange of glances between her and Nanna, her devotee, is clearly defined, even pronounced.

Saint Martin, stationed to Mary's right, looks down at John and the Christ Child, an expression half-tender, half-sorrowful on his lean face. His lips half-parted, firmly grasping the nape of Tanai's neck, he gestures towards the holy children with his left hand in an assertive direction to the donor. He does this because Christ's gesture is freighted with significance, not only as a broad reference to Christ's sacrifice, but also as a sign of personal redemption specifically addressed to Tanai. At the same time, Martin's insistent gestures underline the fact that, despite the significance of Christ's act of play, Tanai does not look at the Christ Child. His head is lifted; his eyes are fixed on Mary and Catherine, and his left hand is raised in a startled gesture that appears elsewhere in Filippino's work. It occurs, for instance, in his *Miracle of the Crucifix* on the west wall lunette of the Carafa chapel. An excited friar who has just witnessed the miracle rushes from Thomas's room with the same gesture of exclamation and, in fact, the same raised eyebrows and wrinkled brow suggestive of surprise (fig. 95). Something surprising has distracted Tanai from the contemplation of the Christ Child and the promise of his own

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678. *Infra*, p. 277–78.



salvation. This can only be the one other significant event that is occurring in the loggia—Mary’s affirmative response to Nanna’s silent prayer.<sup>679</sup>

The same narrative may be read from a compositional point of view, as the disruption and reconstruction of early quattrocento *sacra conversazione*, such as the Rosselli Madonna and Child with Saints Thomas and Augustine (fig. 13) and the Del Mazziere Madonna and Child with Saints Bartholomew and John the Evangelist (fig. 12), in the left transept of Santo Spirito. The latter work, in particular, places the Virgin at a slight angle to her right, facing Saint Bartholomew, her eyes lowered to the Christ Child on her lap. Filippino’s fifteenth-century beholder, intimately acquainted with similar altarpieces, would have had little difficulty recognizing this format as an “initial” stage in the Nerli composition, one in which Mary, her body angled toward her right, her eyes lowered in contemplation of her son, displays him to Tanai at Saint Martin’s invitation.<sup>680</sup> The Christ Child’s involvement with Saint John the Baptist, Nanna’s prayer and Saint Catherine’s entreaty disturb this original order, pulling Mary around to look down at Nanna, as Tanai reacts in excitement and Martin pressures him, quite literally, to focus his attention on Christ and his own salvation.

Thus, as surprising as it may seem, Tanai, the patron of Filippino’s commission, appears to have had himself portrayed as the excited witness to the news of his wife’s salvation. Why would the donor have agreed to such a narrative? More precisely, how would such a narrative have redounded to Tanai’s honor and to the honor of his family?

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679. In technical terms, the reason that Tanai does not look at the Christ Child is that the conventions of donor portraiture in religious painting require the patron to be represented in profile—if only, in Tanai’s case, in three-quarter profile. What Filippino has attempted here is to make use of these conventions in order to elaborate his *istoria*, just as he employed the restrictions on Nanna’s posture and garb to endow her with the specific virtue of singular piety.

680. Mary is positioned at a slight rightward angle in a number of quattrocento Madonna and Child altarpieces, such as Alesso Baldovinetti’s 1454 Caffaggioli altarpiece, now in the Uffizi.

Finally, does the *istoria* set out by the actions and interactions of the foreground protagonists in any way illuminate the significance of the family encounter in the palazzo courtyard?

## 2. The Window: The Charity of Saint Martin

As we have seen, the Nerli chapel window depicted the Charity of Saint Martin with lavish classical adornment and—we suppose—in brilliant color (fig. 84). The saint, on horseback, is caught raising his sword to slice his scarlet cloak, which already wraps the waiting beggar in its folds. We noted that the elaborate decorative motifs of Filippino's niche design link the saint's iconic act of charity to the City of God, represented in the altarpiece by the foreground loggia. What is the relationship between Saint Martin, the *caritas* demonstrated by his behavior and the narratives set out by Filippino in his altarpiece?

Born in what is now Hungary in the early fourth century, the son of a military officer, Martin grew up in Pavia in Italy, and converted to Christianity at the age of twelve.<sup>681</sup> Required by law to join the army at fifteen, Martin served in the *scholae*, the elite corps of the emperor's guard. While stationed in France, he underwent the crucial experience that reaffirmed his faith and defined the values that characterized his sanctity. One winter day, as he rode out through a gate of the city of Amiens, a half-naked beggar approached him. In De Voragine's words, "No one had given him alms, and Martin understood that this man had been kept for him."<sup>682</sup> The saint cut his cloak and gave half

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681. The principal source for Martin's life is his follower Sulpicius Severus's *Vita Sancti Martini*, on which De Voragine's account is based. Sulpice Sévère, *Vie de Saint Martin*, vol. 2, ed. J. Fondaine (Paris: Sources Chrétiennes, 1968); De Voragine, *Golden Legend*, 292–300. See also C. Stancliffe, *Saint Martin and his Hagiographer: History and Miracle in Sulpicius Severus* (Oxford, 1983).

682. De Voragine, *Golden Legend*, 292.

of it to the beggar. “The following night Martin had a vision of Christ wearing that part of the cloak with which he had covered the beggar, and heard Christ say to the angels who surrounded him: ‘Martin, while still a catechumen, gave me this to cover me.’”<sup>683</sup> Two years later, following his release from the army, Martin remained in France. He was ordained acolyte of Hilary, bishop of Poitiers, and founded a monastery outside that city. Finally, when the inhabitants of Tours asked him to become their bishop, he agreed reluctantly, but lived within a monastery outside the city walls.

Saint Martin was particularly associated with France, the country where he was baptized and where he lived as a monk and bishop. By the late fifth century, however, he had become the object of a cult that spread widely throughout Europe. De Voragine’s adaptation of Silpicius Severus’s letters and *Vita* was particularly influential in disseminating the saint’s cult in Italy. In Florence itself, beyond his patronage of specific guilds, such as the vintners and restaurant owners, Martin was known as the dedicatee of the church of San Martino del Vescovo, located in the heart of the wool-working district. The remaining apse of the old church was acquired and turned into an oratory by the charitable Confraternity of the Buonomini di San Martino.<sup>684</sup> The Buonomini clearly related their own charitable endeavors to Saint Martin’s initial act of *caritas*, as displayed in the church’s program of lunette frescoes. While most of the frescoes in the oratory describe the works of the Buonomini, two, located on the altar wall, celebrate Martin’s seminal act of charity (fig. 90) and his ensuing dream (fig. 102).

San Martino al Vescovo counts among the Florentine churches for which Marco di Bartolomeo Rustici supplied a drawing and a description in his mid-fifteenth-century

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683. Ibid.

684. Supra, n. 38.

spiritual guide to Florence, La dimostrazione dell'andata del Santo Sipolcro.<sup>685</sup> Rustici's pictorial reference to the church features, as well, a drawing of the young Saint Martin on horseback in the act of giving his cloak to the beggar (fig. 103). The illustration of the saint, larger than that of the church and drawn from a different angle, links him loosely to his place of worship, but also creates the impression that the saint occupies his own free-standing and active role in a broader Florentine spiritual landscape.

The iconography of the Charity of Saint Martin itself first emerges in the Middle Ages in illuminated manuscripts.<sup>686</sup> A tenth-century Sacramentary from the Benedictine monastery of Fulda in Germany illustrates Saint Martin's feast day with an image that includes the Charity of Saint Martin, Martin's dream and Christ in Glory (fig. 104).<sup>687</sup> Martin stands outside the gate of Amiens, neatly enclosed within its brick walls, cutting his orange-red cloak. In an eleventh-century sacramentary from the same scriptorium, the depiction of the entire city has been replaced by a corner of city wall and an open gate that protrude into the image from the left, a device that becomes a commonplace of similar representations (fig. 105).<sup>688</sup> Later images of the charity of Saint Martin in fresco, panel and sculpture fluctuate between two general types. The first dispenses with a setting, focusing instead on the interplay of the protagonists, as in the monumental sculpture of the charity of Saint Martin on the west wall of the Cathedral of Saint Martin

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685. Marco di Bartolomeo Rusticci, La dimostrazione dell'andata del Santo Sipolcro, 3 vols., ed. Kathleen Olive (Sydney: University of Sydney Press, 2006).

686. One of the first extant images of Saint Martin appears in the nave mosaic of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna. The saint, wearing a distinctive purple mantle, leads a procession of martyrs towards the apse where an enthroned Christ wears a similar mantle, in reference to Martin's gift of his cloak, through the beggar, to Christ himself. Garetti, Martino, 31.

687. Ibid., 80–81.

688. Ibid., 33.

in Lucca. Images that include the narrative setting mentioned by Severus and de Voragine appear with greater frequency, however. Simone Martini's fresco, included in his influential 1317 program for the chapel of Saint Martin in the lower church of San Francesco at Assisi, incorporated crenellated walls and a tall city gate (fig. 106). The Saint Martin panel from Paolo Veneziano's mid-fourteenth-century polyptych in the Augustinian church of San Giacomo Maggiore in Bologna limits the setting to an abbreviated version of the city gate alone (fig. 107).

The illuminations that accompany the suffrages to Saint Martin in fifteenth-century French and Flemish Books of Hours almost invariably include a towering city gate, placed on the right side of the image. In these miniatures, the distinction between the city behind its walls and the countryside reached through the city gate is made very clear. City buildings are sometimes visible through the open arch, while Martin ventures out onto a rocky country road amidst a landscape of hills and trees, as, for instance, in the 1410-15 Boucicaut Hours (fig. 108).<sup>689</sup> Similarly, a mid-fourteenth-century fresco from the Cathedral of Sant'Andrea Apostolo in Venzone, although badly damaged, displays on the left the city with its crenellated towers, from which Martin has emerged, and on the right a green tree (fig. 109).<sup>690</sup>

The story of Saint Martin and the beggar, as told by Martin's hagiographers, centers not only on an act of compassion but on the saint's recognition of divine intent.

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689. Ms. 2, fol. 34 v, Musée Jacquemart-André. Another example is the mid-fifteenth-century Hours of Catherine of Cleves (Pierpont Morgan Library, ms. 917, fol. 279). In one early sixteenth-century French illumination the monumental gate faces the viewer and takes up most of the background of the image. Book of Hours, Pierpont Morgan Library, ms. M.0250, fol. 141v.

690. One interesting interpretation of the image was devised by Bernardino Butinone and Bernardino Zenale in their 1485-91 polyptych for the church of San Martino and Santa Maria Assunta in Treviglio. The artists made use of the arched polyptych frame, extended illusionistically into the panel, to represent Martin in the act of emerging from an arched gateway. For good measure, they included in the distance a view of a walled city that is surely Amiens.

Martin understands that the beggar is “reserved for him” --in other words, that Christ is immanent in his, Martin’s, life, in the specific aspect of *caritas*. The gate of Amiens frames that discovery and thus defines it as a transition from one state of being to another: Riding out of the city, Martin moves from a stratified social fabric, in which he is embedded and his status is assured, into a landscape governed by an altered metaphysics, where beggars are not what they seem and swords are used to help rather than to harm. In other words, to borrow the spatial language of Augustine, Martin leaves the City of Man and, in so doing, begins his journey as a part of and towards the City of God.

Filippino’s window design belongs to the iconographic type that isolates Martin and the beggar from their narrative setting, translating the narrative of a charitable act into an allegory of *caritas*. As we have seen, the beholder, standing in the Nerli chapel, is cued to read that allegory as a component of the altarpiece’s foreground loggia, thus gaining, visually and notionally, the understanding that the City of God is, as well, the Kingdom of Charity. At the same time, this viewer, familiar with the iconography of Saint Martin’s Charity, would have recognized, in the mid-ground street scene of the Nerli altarpiece, precisely the narrative setting that is lacking in the window design: the exterior gate and walls of the City of Man and the road that leads Martin away from the gate towards the City of God.

### **3. The Palazzo and the Street**

The massive, towering stone gate of the background city is the first object that a beholder sees upon glancing at the middle ground of the altarpiece. To either side of the gate, the city walls stretch out topped with crenellations that are caught by the sunlight.

As we have seen, a slice of wall to either side of a tall gate is precisely the background given to Saint Martin's Charity in virtually all representations of the event that do include a setting. It seems very likely that fifteenth-century beholders, practiced in the meditative type of viewing that I have described earlier, would have responded to the underlying visual unity of window and altarpiece. Such beholders would have readily acknowledged the visible linkages between the allegorical Charity displayed in the window and its familiar narrative setting depicted in the altarpiece and would have willingly expanded upon them.<sup>691</sup> In terms of the model of Christian living proposed by Martin, the significance of the boundary drawn by the city walls and of the road that emerges through the gate intersects with the spiritual geography of Augustine's City of God, pictorially expressed through Filippino's crenellated walls, massive gate and suburban street. The complexities of Augustine's mixed metaphors, in which the blessed and the damned are at once communities and individuals, exclusive stationary loci and mingled wandering souls, emerge in Filippino's *invenzione* as a dark, enclosed city void of humanity and an exposed suburb in which that mingling occurs. What is accomplished by the presence of Martin—or his attributes—is the definition of man's participation in the City of God in terms of *caritas*.

The image of Martin and the beggar relies on a constellation of objects—the cloak, the sword, the horse, the city gate and wall, the road that leads out of the city and beyond—that reoccur with dreamlike sameness in frescoes, manuscript illuminations, statuettes and panels, gaining a metonymic power and freedom. This is the case, most evidently, of the cloak, which reappears worn by Christ in Martin's dream (fig. 102).

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691. Indeed, it seems likely that such a viewer, taking note of the city gate, walls and street, would have actively imagined Saint Martin on his white horse emerging from that gate to his encounter with the beggar.

Thus, in the Nerli chapel, the scarlet cloak worn by Martin and the beggar in Filippino's window design is present, arguably, as mantle, Episcopal cloak and *cappuccio* worn or carried by various figures in the foreground loggia. At the same time, to the quattrocento Florentines who constitute the beholders of the Nerli altarpiece, horses, cloaks and city gates were entirely familiar features of the architecture of everyday life. To insert the referents of Martin's charity within its urban—or rather exurban—setting introduces the charity that divides the blessed from the damned into the very fabric of that everyday life.

As we move away from the gate down the street, we note that three of the houses and storefronts to either side are not touched by sunlight and are topped with black roofs that assimilate them to the dark buildings within the city itself (fig. 96). The other two houses have roofs of rose-colored tile and are illuminated by the raking stream of sunlight that runs through the mid-ground of the panel from right to left. The first of these two houses is a shop front located immediately outside the city gate, at the very locus where Martin would have encountered the beggar when he emerged from the town of Amiens. The sunlit walls and counter of this shop are gilt so that they form a gold frame around what is being sold: bolts of crimson cloth brightly visible against the peach and dun hues of the street. The reference is clearly to the color of *caritas*, to Saint Martin's red cloak and to the active presence, beyond the city gate, of Martin's charity.<sup>692</sup>

Farther on, past cursorily sketched traders, workmen and children, we come upon two dogs, clearly drawn with pointy snouts and round bellies, one white, the other brown-red. On the subject of these dogs, Sharon Strocchia has written, "Captured by Lippis's

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692. A pun may have been intended here, since one of the most popular types of woolen cloth produced in Florence was the high-quality *panni lane sucide de San Martino*. James R. Banker, *The Culture of San Sepolcro during the Youth of Piero della Francesca* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 51. The name of the cloth may have been suggested originally by Saint Martin's cloak or by the location of the wool-trading business in Florence near the oratory of San Martino del Vescovo.



sharp eye for detail, neighbors stop to chat in the shade, their conversation interrupted ... by the sound of dogs growling in the street.”<sup>693</sup> There can be no doubt that the street details accumulated by Filippino would have been recognizable elements of an everyday world and that the painter insisted upon the commonplace character of this world. Yet, it is in and through this commonplace world that charity must be recognized and practiced. The dogs are not growling, although their differences are clearly stated: one is red, the other white. Instead, they stand peacefully nose to nose, and the lifted tail of the red dog is probably wagging. The dogs very likely belong, so to speak, to Saint Martin. Among the saints aligned on the south portal of Chartres Cathedral, Saint Martin, wearing his bishop’s vestments, stands alone in being supported by two dogs who crouch under his slippered feet (fig. 110). Another dog is featured prominently in Lattanzio da Rimini’s (1499–1501) Saint Martin, a polyptych from the church of San Martino a Piazza Brembana in Bergamo (fig. 111). These dogs undoubtedly refer to the episode, derived from Severus and popularized by De Voragine, in which Martin ordered a group of dogs to cease pursuing a rabbit. They stopped instantly in their tracks—proof, according to De Voragine, of Martin’s powers over “nonrational animals.”

To the left of the two dogs stands another house with roofs of rose tile. Here again, the sunlight from the left gilds these tiles and the building’s left-facing wall. On the roof terrace that tops this modest dwelling, a woman wearing a bright crimson dress and a veil is seated behind another slimmer figure who holds a mirror and whose long fair hair hangs loose down her back. Since the house is so evidently a humble one and the

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693. Strocchia, “Theaters of Everyday Life,” 77. It is difficult to recognize the elements of Strocchia’s genre scene in Filippino’s street. I have not been able to find, for instance, the neighbors stopping to chat in the shade.

veiled figure clearly an older woman, we may safely assume that the rooftop figure is a mother engaged in braiding her daughter's hair.<sup>694</sup> Filippino has placed his Nerli groom in the palazzo courtyard immediately below the rooftop scene. Standing behind the horse, head down and hands busy, the groom can only be engaged in one task, braiding the horse's tail. It seems likely that Filippino intended that the groom's braiding draw our attention to the braiding pictured on the rooftop. Taken together, the fact that the mother is wearing the bright red of Saint Martin's cloak—in other words the red of *caritas*—and that the light has painted her house gold suggest that she too is one of the blessed, journeying through everyday life toward the City of God.

The family vignette before the palazzo displays a male member of the Nerli family—perhaps Tanai himself at a younger age—wearing riding boots and a red *lucco* appropriate to a member of Florence's social and political elite. As we noted, he also wears a pilgrim's broad-brimmed black hat, which assimilates him, in this Augustinian context, to Augustine's pilgrim from the City of God. This Nerli “pilgrim” bends down to embrace his young child who returns the embrace. A woman stands close by, her hand placed protectively on the child's head.<sup>695</sup> Her profile pose, erect posture and composure all demonstrate her virtuous qualities and, together with her proximity to father and child, suggest that she is the child's mother and the wife of the Nerli male portrayed in the scene.<sup>696</sup>

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694. On the other hand, Strocchia read this pair as “a craftsman, absorbed in his labor, [who] breathes deep in a high open-air room.” Ibid.

695. It is unlikely that a Nerli wife would be shown appearing in public without an overdress—a *giornea*; however, the woman in the palazzo courtyard appears to be wearing a simple *gamurra*. We are perhaps being told that the palazzo courtyard represents is an extension of *la casa*, private space or, more generally, that this family gathering is intimate and informal.

696. One unresolved issue is whether the male figure is about to set out or has just returned home. The sunlight that pours from left to right through the mid-ground of the painting, but has yet to dispel the sea

While Bridgeman made this scene the center of her iconographic interpretation of the panel, Nelson proposed, somewhat dismissively, that the artist might have wished to add “a touch of warmth” to his work.<sup>697</sup> It is surely significant that Filippino located the vignette so that it could not be missed. The scene is placed at the very center of the panel’s vertical dimension and immediately beneath the center of the line that joins the gazes of Nanna and Mary; it is also included within the prominent oblique that leads from the background hill to Nanna. In addition, the pronounced right-side orthogonal of the panel’s perspectival grid culminates in the family encounter before the palazzo door. Finally, the artist appears to have taken considerable pains to accentuate the father’s brilliant red garment. Loose and ample, the *lucco* falls almost to his feet as he leans forward to kiss his child. Its bright color pulls the beholder’s eye irresistibly toward it, while, at the same time, it encourages linkages with the other touches of crimson on the pathway from palazzo to gate—the red dress of the woman who attends to her daughter’s hair and the bolts of red cloth in the storefront.

Immediately behind the father in his bright garb, and thus clearly included within the vignette, stands a chestnut horse, tied to the palazzo by a scarlet cord. Large, powerfully built and firmly planted on long legs, its crimson bridle ornamented with gold

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haze from the city’s fortress in the right background, is probably morning light. Moreover, the fact that the horse is tethered to the palazzo suggests that the groom has led it out of the stables and tied it up in preparation for his master’s departure—indeed, as we noted, the groom is probably braiding the horse’s tail, an activity that would take place before the master’s departure. If the *paterfamilias* had just returned, it seems likely that the horse would have been led off immediately to the stables. Finally, the severe expressions on the adults’ faces suggest a departure rather than a return. None of these arguments are entirely dispositive; thus it seems possible that the artist and his advisors intended the issue to remain uncertain, so that either or both a departure and a return could be read into the image.

697. Nelson, in “La posizione dei ritratti” (466), connected the family vignette to Ghirlandaio’s ca. 1490 Old Man and Boy in which an elderly man looks down tenderly at a golden-haired boy who reaches up as if to embrace him. Yet, portraits displaying familial sentiment, along the line of Ghirlandaio’s, were rare. The only other such image discussed in the scholarship is Ghirlandaio’s 1488 Francesco Sassetti and His Son Teodoro, a far more formal composition, in which only the close proximity of the figures and the guileless awe of Teodoro’s expression suggests an emotional bond.

medallions that gleam in the sunlight, the horse is vividly displayed against the pallor of the street and surrounding buildings. Its emphatic presence and pictorial specificity distinguish it from the loosely sketched beasts of burden in the street beyond, a laden donkey and, probably, an ox, whose heads are barely visible. The Nerli horse, strong, handsome, well-trained and elegantly harnessed, has much in common with another horse, the one ridden by Saint Martin in the window above the altarpiece. The juxtaposition of the Nerli's monumental horse with the monumental city gate at the end of the street makes explicit the movement that will carry the Nerli father in his scarlet *lucco* and pilgrim's hat down the street, through the gate, into the city. At the same time, we are assured by the absence of luggage that shortly, the father will ride back again, out through the gate down to his waiting family. These juxtaposed elements—the horse, the gate, the cloak or *lucco*—illuminate the spiritual context in which that daily journey is undertaken in both the geography of Augustine's two cities and the Charity of Saint Martin, who rode out of the City of Man to clothe the beggar.

The palazzo vignette does include one apparently extraneous figure, the young groom wearing the Nerli livery. While this groom clearly serves to identify the family grouping, he may also be read as a reference to a specific Florentine representation of the Charity of Saint Martin, displayed on the altar wall of the oratory of San Martino. That image is an exception to the highly standardized iconography of the Charity precisely in including a young groom, who stands in elegant *contraposto* in the foreground holding the bridle of Martin's horse (fig. 90). The fact that Filippino's groom is the virtual twin of the one included in the San Martino Charity suggests an explicit reference that would have been readily accessible to many Florentines.

The linkages between Filippino's *paterfamilias*, Augustine's geography of salvation and the attributes of Saint Martin's Charity identify the Nerli father not only as a pilgrim, denizen of the City of God in exile, but also as a devotee and imitator of Saint Martin, conceived as an intimately imagined patron and guide. Peter Brown has famously accounted for the emergence early in Christian history of the patron saint, a protective being bound to the believer by ties modeled on patronage relationships and Roman *amicitia*.<sup>698</sup> Much more recently, Dale Kent has discussed the ties that bound a fifteenth-century Florentine to his patron saint as one possible model for actual friendship between patron and client.<sup>699</sup> At the same time, an evolving understanding of the multiple pressures and the identities that assaulted Renaissance Florentines have encouraged us to understand the need for models—and often visual models—of piety and the Christian life.<sup>700</sup> It is in these multiple contexts perhaps that we may best understand Tanai's choice of Saint Martin, for the purposes of his chapel at Santo Spirito, not only as intercessor, but as guide for his own edification and that of his descendants.

It is not difficult to conjecture why he would have done so. Martin's connections to Italy, where he spent his childhood, and France, where he lived his adult life, mirror Tanai's own early childhood in France, followed by an adult life in Italy. We know that the altarpiece that Tanai commissioned from Filippino for San Salvatore al Monte included another patron saint of France, Saint Louis IX. Both a preliminary sketch for the altarpiece by the artist and a reinterpretation by the Master of Memphis, a painter

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698. Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

699. Dale Kent, *Friendship, Love and Trust in Renaissance Florence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 32–54.

700. Rubin, *Images and Identity*, xvii.

working within Filippino's workshop, include the figure of Saint Louis.<sup>701</sup> This certainly suggests that Tanai's associations with France, shared by the figure of Martin, remained significant to him as a component of his personal narrative and social identity. In addition, the affinity of Saint Martin with a chivalric cultural ideal admired by Florentine elites and actively promoted by Lorenzo de Medici is likely to have attracted the patrician Tanai. As Adrian S. Hoch has shown, Martin's participation in an elite Roman military corps evolved through the Middle Ages into the fictive status of a knight.<sup>702</sup> In fact, the image of the Charity of Saint Martin in particular is suffused with the spirit of chivalry drawn from the Arthurian "Matter of England" and French romances.<sup>703</sup> Ornamental details, such as the fine horse's elaborate harness, the cloak's ermine lining (fig. 89) and the young knight's head of golden curls (figs. 90, 111) all reference chivalric narratives that endow the exercise of Christian charity with the allure of courtly love.<sup>704</sup>

From the story of Tanai's rejection, at some financial cost, of a stranger's pretensions to sharing his name and arms, we can conjecture the importance to him of his family's patrician lineage.<sup>705</sup> Chivalric attitudes and values certainly infuse Filippino's depiction of the family encounter in front of the palazzo. In that scene, patrician familial rank is explicitly asserted by the palazzo itself, by the groom, by the Nerli colors

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701. Supra, nn. 29, 30.

702. Adrian S. Hoch, "Saint Martin of Tours: His Transformation into a Chivalric Hero and Franciscan Ideal," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 50, no. 4 (1987): fig. 1. Martin's investiture ceremony, nowhere to be found in Severus's *Vita* or its adaptation by De Voragine, was depicted lovingly by Simone Martini in the Saint Martin Chapel, at the Basilica of San Francesco in Assisi.

703. Cecil H. Clough, "Chivalry and Magnificence in the Golden Age of the Italian Renaissance," in *Chivalry in the Renaissance*, ed. Sydney Anglo (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 1990), 39.

704. Indeed, the drama of the narrative in many of these depictions relies greatly on the pictorial contrast between the youth and elegance of the knight on his horse and the decrepitude of the half-naked beggar reaching up to him.

705. Supra, n. 227.

displayed in the groom's livery, by the splendid horse with its gold-bedecked harness and by the rider's ample scarlet garment, which proclaims his membership in Florence's social and political elite. The question remains—what is the act of charity accomplished by the Nerli “pilgrim” in front of his palazzo? We see him bend down to embrace his child, and note that the woman on the roof of the nearby house braiding her daughter's hair is similarly red-clad. Can it be that for the patrons of the altarpiece—the Augustinian Hermits of Santo Spirito as well as the Nerlis—caring for your child and, by extension, for your family is a form of charity in imitation of Martin?

#### **4. Charity and Family**

In his City of God, Augustine speaks precisely of the duties required of the Christian, “a pilgrim in a foreign land, away from God,” who “walks by faith, not by sight,” and requires “divine direction.”<sup>706</sup> “To begin with,” he writes, “a man has a responsibility for his own household.”<sup>707</sup> He grounds the proposition on Paul's uncompromising assertion in 1 Timothy 5:8: “But if any man have not care of his own, and especially of those of his house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel.” Augustine approaches the household as a social organism whose ideal is perfect harmony: “The orders are given by those who are concerned for the interests of others; thus the husband gives orders to the wife, parents to children, masters to servants. While these who are the objects of this concern obey orders.”<sup>708</sup> Yet, the social equilibrium of the household is not the value at the heart of Augustine's discussion. The core notion

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706. Augustine, City of God, XIX, 14, 873.

707. Ibid.

708. Ibid., 874.

linking the Christian practitioner to Christ is the charity that is exercised by the one who gives the orders:

But in the household of the just man who “lives on the basis of faith” and who is still on pilgrimage, far from that Heavenly City, even those who give orders are the servants of those whom they appear to command. For they do not give orders because of a lust for domination but from a dutiful concern for the interests of others, not with pride in taking precedence over others, but with compassion in taking care of others.<sup>709</sup>

The pilgrim and *paterfamilias* represented in front of his palazzo heads the Nerli family and the larger household of which we are shown two representatives, the groom and the young woman who leans out of the window. Yet, within the vignette, Filippino has literally stationed the father lower than his wife, who stands erect on the threshold of their palazzo, one hand on her child’s head in a gesture that is both protective and authoritative. Moreover, in order to kiss his child, the father bends down even further, the curve of his stooped back outlined clearly by the brilliant red of his *lucco* against the pale green-gray of the palazzo facade. He is the servant of these he commands, because he commands out of love. This, in all its complicated simplicity, is the portrayal of *caritas*, the love of neighbor pursued out of love of God, at its most fundamental and necessary, according to Paul, and at its most radical in its illustration of Augustine’s Christian equation of power—exercised out of love of neighbor—with servitude. The Nerli devotion to family and household, framed and defined as an act of *caritas*, modeled on Saint Martin’s act of charity and expressive of the Christian love of neighbor, is depicted specifically in a gesture that merges love and humility: a father’s embrace of his child. More humble still, but equally reflective of parental love, is the image of the

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709. Ibid.



mother on the nearby rooftop tending to her daughter's hair. The primacy of familial love in the Nerli altarpiece certainly reflects the views of the first prior general of the Augustinian order, Giles of Rome, who stressed the great love of husband and wife, source of the friendship between them. Love, according to Giles, controls parental as well as marital relationship and is fundamental to the authority exercised by the parent over the child.<sup>710</sup>

#### **D. *Caritas* and the Augustinian Hermits**

If the particular Christian love displayed in the Nerli altarpiece is grounded in the text of Augustine's City of God, it seems all the more likely that the Augustinian Hermits contributed actively to the theology of *caritas* articulated in Filippino's painting. Do we in fact find in the late quattrocento thinking and practice of the Augustinian Hermits a comparable emphasis on the value of charity sufficient to justify its prominence in the altarpiece?

##### **1. Saint Martin of Tours**

Unlike Saint Catherine of Alexandria, Saint Martin of Tours does not appear to have been particularly popular to the Augustinian Hermits of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.<sup>711</sup> The Augustinians would, of course, have been well aware of the scriptural context for the Charity of Saint Martin in the Gospel of Saint Matthew, 22:39—"Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." By handing over half of his cloak,

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710. Adolar Zumkeller, Theology and History of the Augustinian School in the Middle Ages (Villanova, PA: Augustinian Press, 2007), 82–88.

711. Saint Francis of Assisi's devotion to Saint Martin and the resulting association of Saint Martin with the Franciscans, as well as his specific identification with France, may have precluded a close connection with the Augustinians. The parallels between the biographies of Saint Martin and Saint Francis are recorded explicitly in Tommaso da Celano's 1247 Vita Secunda S. Francisci and suggested in the Legenda Major S. Francisci. Hoch, "Saint Martin of Tours," 479–80.

Saint Martin literally enacts the terms of the commandment: he is treating the beggar as he is treating himself. A late medieval development in the iconography of the image emphasizes this commonality of treatment by displaying both figures wrapped together in Martin's cloak. This naturalistic pictorial device results in the cloak being pulled taut and thus easily divided by Martin's sword and, at the same time, creates a heightened effect of intimacy between the two protagonists. This is precisely what is happening in the fresco of the Charity in the oratory of San Martino in Florence (fig. 90), as well as in Filippino's own window design (fig. 84).<sup>712</sup>

In addition to this broad connection to the text of Matthew, the image of Saint Martin and the beggar appears, from its inception, to have been grounded in Christ's account of the Last Judgment in Matthew 25:34: "Then shall the king say to them that shall be on his right hand: Come, ye blessed of my Father, possess you the kingdom prepared for you... For I was hungry, and you gave me to eat... Naked, and you covered me" (Matt. 25:34–36). When the blessed ask Christ how they could have performed the acts of charity he mentioned, he will reply, "Amen I say to you, as long as you did it to one of these my least brethren you did it to me" (Matt. 25:40). The legend of Saint Martin's dream, in which Christ claims that part of the cloak that was given to the beggar as his own, faithfully translates the language of Matthew into narrative terms.<sup>713</sup> Martin's gift to the beggar is thus an instance of an act that will ensure salvation at the Last Judgment. The significance of Christ's language in Matthew 25:34–36 to the sacred value

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712. Another example is the illumination of the Charity of Saint Martin in the mid-fifteenth-century *Hours of Catherine of Cleves* (Pierpont Morgan Library, ms. 917, fol. 279).

713. In some variants of the Charity iconography, as in the early fifteenth-century *Belles Heures du Duc de Berry*, the two events—the dividing of the cloak and Christ's possession of it—are merged pictorially by the display of a divine hand or of the face of God the Father reaching out from heaven to grasp at a cloak, which is in effect duplicated within the image.

of the Christian love exhibited by Martin is evident in some of the earliest images of the Charity of Saint Martin. The two Sacramentaries produced at the monastery of Fulda in the late tenth (fig. 104) and eleventh centuries (fig. 105) contain illuminations that juxtapose an earthly realm, in which Martin acts and then lies asleep dreaming with a heavenly sphere where Christ sits in judgment, as described in the Gospel of Matthew.

Finally, the friars would have been aware of the subsequent career of Saint Martin, who went on to establish a monastery outside the city of Poitiers. After his election as bishop of Tours, Martin “could not abide the tumult of the city, so he built a monastery about two miles outside the walls and lived there in strict austerity with eighty disciples.”<sup>714</sup> The parallels between the biography of Martin and that of Augustine, also a bishop who lived in a monastery, are evident. The Augustinian Hermits themselves, as self-conscious sons of Augustine, sought to balance the pastoral duties required of mendicants with the obligation to withdraw from the world within a religious community and to retreat within the self in meditation and prayer. The same dynamic, translated into an alternation between a “noisy,” distracting *urbanitas* and a *rusticitas* that allows closer contact with God, marked the bishopric of Martin.<sup>715</sup> Within Filippino’s painting, Santo Spirito, like Martin’s monastery outside Poitiers, is located squarely outside the city, in a realm that includes, or at least adjoins, the court of heaven. Clearly, the peregrinations of the blessed, coming and going between the city and a locus outside the city, closer to God, is a leitmotiv of the Nerli Chapel, from the young Martin’s riding out to meet the

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714. De Voragine, *Golden Legend*, 294.

715. Discussing Martin, although without mentioning Augustine, Alessio Persik argues that the perfect life lived between the ideals of monastery and *cathedra* is characteristic of fourth-century spirituality, which sought models of sainthood beyond that of Saint Anthony Abbot and other saints of the desert. “San Martino “Protomonaco” d’Occidente e testimone della spritualta di Aquileia Cristiana,” in Garetti, *Martino*, 41–75.

beggar and the Nerli father journeying into the city and out again through the looming gate, to the bishop-monks Martin and Augustine. The perfect life, Jordan of Quedlinburg claimed, was “for a time to rest in contemplation in solitude with God alone and for a time to go forth, through contemplation, to regurgitate from deep inside the spiritual wellsprings to others, for the purpose of winning souls.”<sup>716</sup> The path of coming and going, in and out of the city, is the path of *caritas* in this world.

Similarly, in the De Doctrina Christiana, the core image of the Christian life is that of the journey to Christ—“the kingdom of charity”—along the path that is itself Christ.<sup>717</sup> In Augustinian terms, when Saint Martin rides out through the city gate, the path he rides is Christ—“the way, and the truth and the life” (John 14:6). Christ’s way, which Augustine will define later as the way of the pilgrim citizen from the City of God, is also a voyage of purification: “We should think of this purification process as being a kind of walk, a kind of voyage toward our home country. We do not draw near ... by movement in place to the one who is present everywhere, but by honest commitment and good behavior.”<sup>718</sup> In the transaction between Martin, the beggar and Christ, the cloak—the color of Christ’s sacrificial blood—performs as a fluid, multivalent sign referring to Martin’s love of Christ and neighbor and to Charity itself, which is Christ. That night, Christ appears to Martin in a dream wearing the beggar’s cloak. Was the beggar Christ? Many fifteenth-century illustrations of the legend, notably Lorenzo di Bicci’s predella panel (fig. 89) and the Charity of Saint Martin at the oratory of San Martino (fig. 90),

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716. Liber Vitasfratrum, 2, 21, cited by Saak, High Way to Heaven, 283.

717. Augustine, De Doctrina Christiana, III, 15, 23, 179.

718. *Ibid.*, I, 10, 10, 110.

present an unusually composed beggar who stands erect and wears a short brown beard.<sup>719</sup>

What the legend itself tells us, in any case, is that, on the road that is Christ, love of neighbor and love of God will merge in the light of Christ's pronouncement that the gift to the least of men is a gift to him (Matt. 25:40). The way out of the City of Man to the City of God—"the home country"—is Christ himself: "It is along me that you come, at me that you arrive, in me that you abide."<sup>720</sup> In Filippino's altarpiece, the same way "home" leads the pilgrim down the suburban street into the city and back home again to the family palazzo, which abuts the sacred spaces of church, chapel and loggia.

## **2. The Judgment of Love**

The Charity of Saint Martin may thus be understood in light of Augustine's radical synthesis of all signs under the judgment of love, a synthesis that eventually merges love of neighbor and love of God within the divine, who is at once object of all love and Love itself. In the De Doctrina Christiana, Augustine posits Christian exegesis—and by extension Christian living—within this broad heuristics of Charity: "If it seems you that you have understood the divine scriptures ... in such a way that ... you do not build up this twin love of God and neighbor, then you have not yet understood them."<sup>721</sup> In so doing, Augustine insists upon the full weight and implication of Christ's two commandments: "So ... the fulfillment and the end of the law and of all the divine

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719. The beardless beggar in Filippino's window design, however, does not seem to be depicted as Christ in disguise (fig. 2).

720. Ibid., I, 34, 38, 123.

721. Ibid., I, 36, 40, 124.

scriptures is love (Rom. 13:8; 1 Tim. 1:5).<sup>722</sup> If love is at the core of Christian understanding and Christian praxis, it is because Charity, like Wisdom, is at the core of Augustine’s Christian metaphysics. John’s assertion that “God is Charity,” (John 4:8,16) implies its converse—Charity is God.<sup>723</sup> Discussing the nature of divinity in The Trinity, Augustine concludes, “In that supremely simple nature [God] substance is not one thing and charity another, but substance is charity and charity is substance.”<sup>724</sup>

A similar identification of divinity with love and a similar privileging of charity within Christian faith and praxis flourish in late fifteenth-century religious circles—many of them Augustinian—in Florence and Rome. In a renowned rhetorical study, John O’Malley found such a spiritual and pastoral stance characteristic of sermons delivered at that time at the papal *curia*.<sup>725</sup> In many of the sermons studied by O’Malley, the notion of Christ’s self-sacrifice, his death on the cross, sheds some of its penitential cast to emerge as a universally paradigmatic charitable act, which defines the nature and strength of the love given by God to man.<sup>726</sup> The charity of Christ is, for instance, a theme dear to Aurelio Brandolini, a Florentine-born humanist who entered the Augustinian order in 1491 and joined the observant convent of San Gallo outside Florence.<sup>727</sup> In a sermon on the Last Supper, delivered at San Gallo on Holy Thursday of 1491, Brandolini found

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722. Ibid., I, 35, 39, 123.

723. Augustine, The Trinity, XV, 31, 421.

724. Augustine concedes that the Holy Spirit in particular may be linked to the value of Charity; but asserts, “I do not know why Father and Son and Holy Spirit should not all be called charity and all together be one charity, just as Father and Son and Holy Spirit are all called wisdom and are all together not three wisdoms but one wisdom.” Ibid., XV, 29, 419.

725. John O’Malley, Praise and Blame in Renaissance Rome: Rhetoric, Doctrine, and Reform in the Sacred Orators of the Papal Court, c. 1450–1521 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1979).

726. Ibid., 146.

727. Trinkaus, In Our Image 1:298.

Christ's love evident from the humility with which he washed the apostles' feet, from his express teaching that men must love each other as he, Christ, loved them, and finally from the institution of the Eucharist, symbol of love.<sup>728</sup> In his 1496 Paradoxa Christiana, Brandolini called upon his readers to imitate Christ in the perfection and all-inclusiveness of his charity:

What cause impelled God to undergo in human habit so many sufferings, so many insults and such a shameful death in innocence? Unless He had embraced the men who were His enemies in immense charity, He would never have submitted Himself to them to be so wickedly derided, so cruelly tortured. What greater indication of His incredible charity towards his enemies is there than that speech of his while fixed to the cross and breathing out his soul: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do!"<sup>729</sup>

This focus on John's equation of God and Love and on the all-embracing *caritas* of Christ often drew upon a passage from Romans 5:5, quoted by Augustine: "The charity of God is poured forth in our hearts, by the Holy Ghost, who is given to us."<sup>730</sup> In a discourse written between 1503 and 1508, Giles of Viterbo, elected prior general of the Augustinian Hermits in 1507, linked this outpouring of love with the Incarnation, its source and its symbol.<sup>731</sup> The Incarnation is a work of love, to which man, divinized through divine love, must respond through love of God and neighbor. "Thus," O'Malley

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728. Oratio in cena domini Florentiae in aede Sancti Galli habita 1491, Siena, Biblioteca comunale degli Intronati MS H. VI. 30, fols. 120-124v., published in John M. McManamon, "Renaissance Preaching: Theory and Practice. A Holy Thursday Sermon of Aurelio Brandolini," Viator, 10 (1979): 356.

729. Trinkaus, In Our Image 1: 310-11.

730. Augustine, The Trinity, XV, 31, 32.

731. Giles of Viterbo, "To Antonio Zocchi and the Romans," published in John O'Malley, "Man's Dignity, God's Love, and The Destiny of Rome: A Text of Giles of Viterbo," Viator 111 (1972): 390-

concludes, “love or charity is seen as the principal and central duty of the Christian life.”<sup>732</sup>

The notion, founded doctrinally on Christ’s statements in Matthew 25, that charity and charitable works—rather, for instance, than penitential practices or the reception of the sacraments—are at the root of the Christian ethos is a consistent theme in the fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century sermons studied by O’Malley.<sup>733</sup> Works of mercy and the forgiveness of one’s enemies figure importantly in Aurelio Brandolini’s Christiana Paradoxa, his sermon on the virtues of Christ.<sup>734</sup> Similarly, when Ambrogio Massari, prior general of the Augustinians from 1477 to 1485, expounded for his order on the provision of Augustine’s Rule that required the sharing of property, he wrote of compassionate concern for others and the care of these in need.<sup>735</sup>

The sensibility chartered by O’Malley is in important respects an Augustinian one in its privileging of the affective roots of faith. Charity, understood as the pursuit of brotherly love, lay at the heart of the Augustinian monastic ideal. The affective theology that, since Giles of Rome, had grounded the endeavors of Augustinian scholars underlay the friars’ notion of charity. In the mid-fourteenth century, Gregory of Rimini had paraphrased 1 Timothy 1:5—“So the end of the commandment is love”—reasserting this Augustinian premise: “The entire law, all the prophets, as well as the Gospels and the

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732. Ibid., 394.

733. While preachers at the papal court sang the praises of all the virtues, they also clarified that these virtues served the ultimate purposes of charity. O’Malley, Praise and Blame, 175.

734. Ibid., 166.

735. Massari, “Commentary on the ‘Third Rule,’” in Vita praecellentissii ecclesiae doctoris divi Aurelii Augustini. (Rome: G. Herolt, 1481,) Hain 5683, fols. [37v-38r], quoted and translated in O’Malley, Praise and Blame, 168. The rule required, Massari asserted, “sharing whatever goods we have with our brothers, the poor, visiting the sick, offering consolation to the suffering and afflicted, and enjoying union, peace and charity with all.”



apostolic teachings, are directed toward and lead ‘*ad caritatem*.’”<sup>736</sup> The self-conscious embrace of love as the Christian way marked the Augustinians’ pastoral endeavors; in Saak’s words, “love was expressed by acts of love, kindness, and mercy. Acts of mercy, the giving of alms were love made concrete and real.”<sup>737</sup>

At the same time, the foregrounding of *caritas* in the Nerli chapel may also have been understood in narrower, localized terms, as an expression of the Santo Spirito community’s particular relationship with the Holy Spirit. As we noted earlier, Charity participates in the nature of all three persons of the Trinity. “All the same,” Augustine writes, “the Holy Spirit is distinctively named charity,”<sup>738</sup> because it is specifically through the Spirit that “the charity of God is poured out in our hearts and through it the whole triad dwells in us.”<sup>739</sup> Speaking of the gift of love, Augustine exclaims, “Nothing is more excellent than this gift of God. This alone is what distinguishes between the sons of the eternal kingdom and the sons of eternal perdition. Other endowments too are given through the Spirit, but without charity they are of no use.”<sup>740</sup> It is the Holy Spirit that transfers the faculty of loving possessed by God to mankind, so that mankind may devote it to God and to neighbor. In turn, the image of the Holy Spirit is expressive of God’s love for mankind and the resulting love at work between man and God and man and neighbor. The dove of the Holy Spirit in the foreground of the Nerli altarpiece, its wings outstretched above the central figure of the Virgin, signals, as we have seen, that the

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736. Gregory of Rimini, 1 in The Sentences, Prol, 54 I., cited in Saak, High Way to Heaven, 341 and n. 373.

737. Saak, High Way to Heaven, 366.

738. Augustine, The Trinity, XV, 5, 29, 419.

739. Ibid., 32, 421.

740. Ibid.

loggia and the church of Santo Spirito are overlapping spaces. The dove's presence at the center of the loggia cornice also reminds the beholder—and in particular the beholder who is also a Santo Spirito friar—that it is through the Holy Spirit, which pours God's love into our hearts, that the acts of charity depicted in the altarpiece can unfold. Ultimately, the presence of the dove asserts the special relationship between the Santo Spirito friars and the Holy Spirit, whose most important gift is the ability to love.

### **E. Practicing Charity in the Nerli Altarpiece**

As we have seen, within the multilayered narratives of Filippino's painting, the practice of charity appears articulated in terms that are almost exclusively familial and domestic. At the same time, the chapel's celebration of Martin's gift to the beggar as a paradigmatic charitable act conforms to a broader notion of Charity as an intimate involvement with a loving Christ. The eloquent interaction between the Christ Child and the young Saint John the Baptist, as depicted in the altarpiece, brings further emphasis and new inflections to the core notion of Divine love for mankind.

#### **1. The Christ Child and the Baptist**

Kneeling at the Madonna's feet, the infant John the Baptist holds up his rough-hewn wicker cross, while the Christ Child, heavy-lidded and restless in Mary's arms, reaches down to grab the cross in a clear reference to Jesus' embrace of his own crucifixion. As I will discuss, the interaction of the Baptist and Christ constitutes in some respects an independent narrative. The appearance of the infant Baptist by the Christ Child's side in depictions of the Holy Family or in *sacra conversazione* is a frequent

occurrence in late fifteenth-century and early sixteenth-century Florentine art.<sup>741</sup>

Following his work on the Carafa Chapel, Filippino executed for Cardinal Carafa a tondo on this theme, The Holy Family with the Young Saint John the Baptist and Saint Margaret, in which the Christ Child and the infant Baptist embrace (fig. 94). In two articles Marilyn Aronberg Lavin traced the emergence of the iconography of the Holy Infants from the apocryphal Protoevangelium of James, the twelfth-century Meditations on the Life of Christ and a vernacular early fourteenth-century Life of John the Baptist.<sup>742</sup> This literature dwelt upon an encounter in the desert between the two adolescents: the Baptist, who had already chosen his ascetic vocation, and the Christ Child on his way home from Egypt with his parents. Upon meeting John, Mary and Jesus bless him, and Jesus relates to him the principal events of his own coming passion.<sup>743</sup>

During the last decades of the fifteenth century, the iconography had further expanded to include explicit references to the Passion, references that were narratively grounded in Christ's prophecy of his own death, delivered to John. The best-known examples of this inclusive iconography are two tondi by Raphael, his 1506 Madonna of the Meadow and his 1510–11 Alba Madonna (fig. 113).<sup>744</sup> In both these panels, the landscape background refers to the wilderness in which the children's encounter took

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741. Dalli Regoli, La preveggenza della Vergine, 9.

742. Marilyn Aronberg Lavin, "Giovannino Battista: A Study in Renaissance Religious Symbolism," The Art Bulletin 27 (1955): 85–101; Lavin, "Giovanno Battista: A Supplement," The Art Bulletin 43 (1961): 319–26.

743. The Nerli altarpiece belongs to that category of fifteenth-century Florentine images that merge the wilderness encounter of the Christ Child and San Giovannino with another meeting described in the literature, that of the infant Baptist and the newly born Christ. An influential example of such a pictorial amalgam is Fra Filippo Lippi's 1459 Adoration of the Christ Child painted for the chapel of the Medici Palace.

744. Another panel bearing such a reference is a 1510–15 tondo by Piero di Cosimo, The Nativity with the Infant St John the Baptist and Two Musician Angels, in which the infant Jesus has seized the Baptist's cross and clasps it to his breast; Geronimus, Piero di Cosimo, 283, fig. 211.

place, while Christ's bold grasp of the Baptist's cross points to the coming Passion foretold to John. In the Alba Madonna, in addition, Mary's narrowed eyes, focused on the cross in her son's hand, make it entirely clear that she, as well as John, is an intelligent recipient of the prophetic message.

Among the works noted by Lavin in her extensive survey, the earliest to feature the Christ Child clasping John's cross is, in fact, Filippino's Nerli altarpiece.<sup>745</sup> Whether or not Christ's gesture is actually Filippino's *invenzione*, it is clear that, at the time the altarpiece was executed, the act was far from a routine component of the interplay between Christ and San Giovannino. Its inclusion within the painting was the product of a purposive effort to introduce a reference to the coming Passion into the broader topos of the encounter between the children under the eye of Mary. Christ's grip on John's cross should thus be read, not only as a broad Eucharistic statement whose primary purpose is to refer to the altar table below, but also as the pictorial representation of the detailed prophecy of the Passion made to the Baptist and to the Madonna herself. This revelation, as we have seen, plays a role as part of the chain of movement and feeling that circles through and around the loggia. It is Christ's hold on John's cross—the pictorial manifestation of his prophetic message—that casts the veil of weariness and sorrow over Mary's face as she turns to respond to Nanna's prayer.

From a compositional point of view, the play of the children with the young Baptist's cross functions to draw the figure of the Baptist into the underlying structure of the composition. Yet, the specifics of Filippino's stylistic and coloristic treatment actually counteract this effect by differentiating the two children from their pictorial

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745. Lavin, "Battista: A Study," 98 n. 78.

context. As we have seen, the foreground figures of the Nerli altarpiece are painted in broad areas of saturated color. Reds predominate against gray-whites, the blue field of the Virgin's cloak and the black of the patrons' garb. The two infants, on the other hand, are depicted in a limited range of subdued earth-toned hues and with softened contours that emphasize the sensuous delicacy of the childish flesh.<sup>746</sup> At once intimately human and ethereal, these holy infants contrast strikingly with the sharply delineated Christ Child and Baptist—voluminous and brilliant in scarlet drapery—of Filippino's Carafa tondo (fig. 94). Filippino's treatment of the theme in the Nerli altarpiece recalls instead the limited color palette and the *sfumato* handling of these same infants in the earliest version of Leonardo's Virgin of the Rocks (fig. 112). By the late quattrocento, Leonardo's two versions of The Virgin of the Rocks were probably the most influential depictions of the meeting of Christ and the Baptist in the desert. Although both works have always been associated with Leonardo's commission for the Confraternity of the Immaculate Conception in the church of San Francesco Grande in Milan, their treatment of the theme exercised considerable influence in Florence.<sup>747</sup> Twelve copies of the earlier work, dated to 1482–86, were executed in Florence in the late quattrocento and early cinquecento.<sup>748</sup>

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746. This relatively subtle stylistic shift is not unduly disruptive to the overall composition, particularly since the soft gray-browns of the infants' coloring melds with certain components of the loggia décor—the gold and gray-brown of the throne sculptures and the gray-green of the landscape visible beyond the Christ Child.

747. Pietro C. Marani, Leonardo da Vinci: The Complete Paintings, trans. A. Lawrence Jenkins (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2000), 148.

748. A number of scholars have argued, in fact, that Leonardo executed studies for this early version of the Virgin of the Rocks or even the panel itself in Florence, and then brought it with him to Milan as a specimen of his skill and as a possible substitute for the commissioned work. Martin Davies, National Gallery Catalogues: The Earlier Italian Schools (London: National Gallery Publications, 1961), 261–81; Kenneth Clark, Leonardo da Vinci, rev. ed. (London: Penguin Books, 1988), 90–97. If that is the case, it is possible that Florentine artists had access to such studies or to the work itself before its departure for Milan. Geronimus, Piero di Cosimo, 264.

To Florentine viewers well acquainted with the tale of the Holy Children's meeting and sensitive to Leonardo's representation of the topos, the vertical configuration consisting of the Baptist, the cross, the Christ Child and the hillside, stamped as they are with Leonardo's style, would necessarily bring to mind the tale and its representation by Leonardo and his imitators. It is also likely that this vertical configuration functioned as a springboard for the viewer's independent meditation upon that encounter; or, to use a term employed in a previous chapter, it performs as a "meditative field," similar to those we encountered in Piero di Cosimo's Visitation. In this case, the segregation of the field from the rest of the panel by means of a subtle deviation in style further encourages the viewer to read its elements as a unified and independent source of enlightenment. Within the meditative field, the landscape glimpsed behind Christ's head would likely have been read as the actual locus of the two infants' encounter, and imaginatively populated with the young Baptist and the Holy Family.

The presence of Leonardo's style here has further effects beyond the narrative references and the viewer's imaginative play with these references. We noted earlier the cumulative effect of the foreground figures' graceful movement on the emotions of the observer, as suggested by Alberti's influential thesis. The interaction of the two infants benefits from an additional affective charge, elicited by the heightened *dolcezza* that was thought broadly characteristic of Leonardo's style.<sup>749</sup> Because the blurred contours, accentuated relief and enhanced naturalism of Leonardo's *sfumato* are particularly

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749. One of the earliest written descriptive references to Leonardo's art was made by Antonio de' Beatis, the secretary to the Cardinal Louis of Aragon, who visited Leonardo in France in 1510. He found the artist unable to use his right hand. Thus, de Beatis noted, "he can no longer paint with the sweetness of style (*dolcezza*) that he used to have." Catherine M. Soussloff, "Discourse/Figure/Love: The Location of Style in Early Modern Sources on Leonardo da Vinci," in Leonardo da Vinci and the Ethics of Style, ed. Claire Farago (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), 43–45.

effective in conveying the softly rounded, tender, opalescent flesh of young children, the simultaneous assertion of Christ's coming sacrifice elicits in the responsive viewer a heightened apprehension of pathos, felt as a bittersweet melding of pleasure and pain. Indeed, we can describe Filippino's use of Leonardo's restricted hues and gentle *sfumato* as rhetorically purposive and directed at the viewer, who is told not only what to see but how to see it. In saturating his depiction of the Christ Child with Leonardo's *grazia*, Filippino inflected the subjectivity of his beholder with a tenderness that rendered it capable of perceiving the pathos of Christ's self-sacrifice. We are prompted, in other words, to look through the eyes of the heart, with a charitable gaze that brings "the love of God and neighbor" to bear on the image of the infant savior of mankind.

This notion of charity as both a response to an emotional stimulus and a form of perception and understanding—at once emotional and intellectual—necessary to our understanding of Christian truth is, of course, thoroughly Augustinian. As we have seen, the De Doctrina Christiana, for instance, clearly imposes a heuristics of *caritas* on the student of the scriptures. At the same time, the emotional impact of the interaction between the Holy Children functions as well to remind the viewer of Christ's own *caritas*, indeed of his nature as Charity itself.<sup>750</sup> One purpose of the rhetoric used by late quattrocento preachers at the papal court was, as we have seen, to offer emotionally compelling models of the charitable Christian life, including that of Christ. Filippino has depicted Christ's love for man in such a way as to elicit admiration, wonder and finally a responsive love, the very love of God that is the core of charity. In turn, the love of God

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750. As we noted earlier, among late quattrocento preachers at the papal court, the cross signified as much the immense love of God for man as it did the Redemption of mankind or the Passion itself. O'Malley mentions, for instance, a 1450-51 sermon by Pietro Del Monte, in which the cross is mentioned as "a sign ... of how immense is God's love for man." Praise and Blame, 83.

fosters the desire to imitate Christ's own *caritas*, a desire that leads to the love of neighbor, that unity of hearts and minds urged by Massari upon the friars of his order.

In Filippino's own pictorial sermon, the Christ Child's hand on the cross, a gesture that signifies Christ's love of all mankind, is also specifically addressed to the patron Tanai de Nerli. Tanai kneels close by and is explicitly urged by Saint Martin to contemplate Christ in the act of seizing the cross. Yet, as we have noted, Tanai looks up at Mary, gesturing as if seized with emotion at the Virgin's acknowledgement of his wife's prayer. The contemporary emphasis on the imitation of an admirable example, particularly the example of Christ, suggests that the patron may be depicted in precisely such an act of imitation: Tanai ignores the sign of divine favor revealed to him in order to respond to a sign of Marian favor directed at his wife. He is represented, in other words, as engaged in an act of *caritas*, whose self-denying character recalls and imitates the loving sacrifice of Christ.

## **2. The Throne Sculptures**

The relevance of marital love to the notions of charity explored in the altarpiece is affirmed by Filippino's bold treatment of the theme of sexual cupidity, introduced as sculptural artifact and mythological ornament into the painting's foreground scene. The base of the Virgin's walnut throne bears a deep-relief carving (fig. 114) that is the focus of considerable ambivalence—on the part of painter and beholder—and of negotiated strategies of presentation that take that ambivalence into account. The relief's position at the base of the throne places it in the middle of the loggia and close to the center of the picture plane. In addition, the large triangular carved ram's head above the sculpture draws the viewer's attention by pointing downward toward it, while the flow of light



from the left highlights protruding features. On the other hand, the relief's diminutive scale, which contrasts with the ram's head above it and, generally, with the life-size scale of the foreground figures, obscures its legibility. To distinguish the relief's individual features, the viewer must isolate it within the overall field of the panel and subject it to a close reading. Elsewhere, I have argued that such a close reading leads to imaginative interpretation and narrative play. In this case, the responses elicited by careful scrutiny are more likely to involve strong, perhaps conflicting, emotional—even visceral—reactions that prompt the viewer's analysis of the reactions themselves. In other words, what the medium of the segregated field may entail here is meditative self-examination in light of the Christian values and the models of Christian praxis held up in the altarpiece.

The sculpture consists of two adjoining scenes. In the first, a sea-centaur holds up a massive truncheon while grasping by the hair a female figure who cringes away and yet clasps—pleadingly perhaps—onto the centaur's arm. The female's furry or scaly lower body suggests that she belongs to a similar species as the male. Thus, the tightly furled Nereid tail displayed to the left of the female centaur and closely framed by two other serpentine shapes is likely to belong to her. Filippino has depicted the male figure in an abruptly contorted posture, so that, as he attacks the female from right to left with the front part of his body, the lower of his body still moves from left to right. Therefore the equine half of the male sea-centaur can be plausibly connected to the undulating, interlocked tails that frame the curled tail of the female. To the right of this struggling pair, another sea-centaur has pinned down a female figure, either a human or Nereid, who holds onto him, her head twisted back against the base of the throne. With one raised

arm, the second centaur blocks what may be an inadvertent blow from the raised weapon of the first.

While it is clear that the male sea-centaurs are assaulting the females, what is actually happening remains ambiguous. Are we to assume that the first centaur will simply bring down his weapon on his defenseless victim in an act of murder? The answer is not clear, although the female's clinging gesture and the image of her curled tail framed by his twin tails suggest, instead, that what is occurring here is threatened violence and eventual rape. In turn, the protective gesture of the second sea-centaur does not negate the fact that he seems to have forced the female back against a fictive wall formed by the throne base. Here again, we are spectators of what must be a rape. At the same time, the parted knees of the second female figure, whose arms are wrapped around the centaur's back, suggest that female sexuality, as well as male lust, is implicated. What the artist intended here, it seems, is to foreground clear indicia of extreme male brutality and female terror so as to taint male lust with the stain of violent rape, while, at the same time, maintaining a suggestion of female sexual complicity. Nelson has described the scene's depiction of male violence against female victims as "disturbing."<sup>751</sup> Rubin, in turn, suggests that the relief would have been "troubling" to fifteenth-century beholders.<sup>752</sup> Particularly "troubling," one might think, would have been the rounded, emphatically voluptuous forms that Filippino has imparted to his female victims, forms that give the sculpture an undeniable erotic charge. As a result, a male beholder investigating the image might well have found himself furtively complicit in what is clearly an appalling scene of frenzied brutality.

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751. Nelson, "La rinascita dell'antichita," 423.

752. Rubin, Images and Identity, 225.

At the same time, the violence depicted in the sculpture is conveyed to the viewer distanced and thus, to some extent, bled of its potency. As a painted sign, the artist's depiction of this rape refers not to the rape itself but to its representation in miniature, carved in wood and left unpainted, on the base of the Virgin's throne. The relief, comparable to that of a grisaille image, suggests not only an earlier time—classical antiquity—but also an altogether different universe populated with the semi-human deities of classical myth. The distancing effect of the intermediary sign, the carved object, is reinforced by the tour de force character of Filippino's work here. On a much-reduced scale and without the benefit of color contrast, the artist captured complex beings, partly human, partly horse, partly fish, in serpentine poses that fully evoke oversize passions, lust, battle frenzy and terror. Yet, if the elaborately ornamental and inventive character of the lower throne sculpture mitigates to some degree its "shock value," this should not distract us from the extraordinary fact of the relief's very presence. For reasons that are not immediately evident, Filippino placed, near the center of the panel and in proximity to Mary, a carving that depicts violent acts of rape in the language of ancient myth and by means of erotically compelling forms.

Nelson discussed the sea-centaur relief as part of a broader argument about the iconographic purpose of *l'antica* carvings in Filippino's works.<sup>753</sup> Nelson concluded that in many cases, particularly where classical ornamental motifs occupied the edges

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753. Nelson reviews briefly positions taken in the literature about the iconographic relevance of antique motifs, including Nicole Dacos' estimation that the subject matter of antique carved jewels and cameos was of little concern to the quattrocento artists who reproduced them. Nelson, "La rinascita dell' antichità," 423; Dacos, "La fortuna delle gemme medicee nel Rinascimento," in *Il Tesoro di Lorenzo il Magnifico*, vol. 1, *Le gemme*, ed. Nicole Dacos, Antonio Giuliano, and Ulrico Pannuti (Florence: Sansoni, 1973), 145. For opposing views, see Margot Wittkower and Rudolf Wittkower, *Born under Saturn: The Character and Conduct of Artists: A Documented History from Antiquity to the French Revolution* (New York: New York Review Books, 1963), 290–91; Edgar Wind, "Donatello's Judith: A Symbol of 'Sanctimonia,'" *Journal of the Warburg Institute* 1 (1937): 62–63; Geiger, *Carafa Chapel*, 168–70.

rather than the center of the work, these decorations had a purely decorative rather than an iconographic function.<sup>754</sup> Specifically, Nelson assimilated the sea-centaur relief to the artist's other depictions of antique sculpture on the theme of male sexual brutality in the Carafa and Strozzi chapels, suggesting the persistence of a common decorative theme independent from the iconography of a particular work. The parallels mentioned by Nelson are not persuasive, however. The Strozzi chapel relief, which decorates Filippino's Raising of Druysyana, portrays a woman woken from sleep by a raucous crowd that includes a satyr; it very likely refers to the waking of Ariadne by Dionysus and his followers, an appropriate classical parallel to the raising of Druysyana. As to the male and female sea-centaurs on Mary's tomb in the Carafa Chapel Ascension, they are hardly engaged in a struggle, as suggested by Nelson. Instead, they swim forward with linked arms in contented unison (fig. 88).<sup>755</sup>

The differences between Filippino's treatment of paired sea-creatures on Mary's Carafa Chapel sarcophagus and on her Nerli altarpiece throne may help us reconstruct the likely approach of a quattrocento beholder to the sea-centaur relief. Decorative detail representing classically inspired images of Nereids and Tritons was extremely popular in Italian Renaissance art beginning in the mid-quattrocento.<sup>756</sup> Such figures were ordinarily derived from precisely the sort of marine sarcophagus that Filippino included in his Carafa Chapel fresco. Indeed, several sarcophagi of this type would have been

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754. Nelson's point that the location of the antique motifs at the outer margins of an image often indicates iconographic irrelevance suggests that the reverse proposition may be equally true; thus the Nerli sea-centaur sculpture, situated near the center of Filippino's composition, is likely to bear iconographic as well as formal value.

755. What Nelson describes as the Triton's violent grip on the Nereid's hair is in fact an abbreviated version of the classical motif in which Triton and Nereid hold up a veil together. *Infra*, fig. 36.

756. See Kenneth Clark, "Transformations of Nereids in the Renaissance," The Burlington Magazine 97, no. 628 (1955): 214–19.

accessible to Filippino in Rome. We know, for instance, that a mid-second-century example was located at the church of San Francesco a Ripa in the Trastevere during the quattrocento.<sup>757</sup> The theme of the marine sarcophagus, the sea-*thiassos*, is consistent: The Nereids, usually represented as having a human form and a serpent's tail, ride through the waves on the tails of Tritons or hippocamps, sometimes half clothed, veils curved over them in the wind, sometimes stretched out sensuously naked.<sup>758</sup> As with Filippino's sea-centaurs, the figures' long and powerful tails often curl decoratively behind or about them in designs that emphasize the effect of movement characteristic of a *thiassos* or procession and suggest, as well, the motion of water and wind (fig. 115). While the erotic subtext is clear, there is no suggestion of a struggle between Nereid and Triton. The emotional context of their relationships, as interpreted in the quattrocento, is indicated by a sarcophagus fragment in which a Triton shown from the back clasps a forward-facing Nereid (fig. 116). The relief with its bashful Nereid and coaxing Triton was reproduced in the Codex Escorialensis (fig. 117) and by Pinturricchio in his ceiling for the Palazzo of Domenico della Rovere in Rome. More striking still is the contrast between Filippino's brutal scene and the cheerful Nereid medallions that decorate Nera Sasseti's tomb in the Sasseti chapel at Santa Trinita (fig. 118, a and b). Filippino may indeed have chosen to purposely distinguish his paired sea-creatures from these of Nera

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757. Another Roman marine sarcophagus, in the Della Valle Collection by the sixteenth century, was popular with quattrocento artists and was probably situated in an exposed location. Although no longer existent in its entirety, it was reproduced in 1483 in a missal illuminated by Attavante degli Attavanti. Eve Borsook and Johannes Offerhaus, Francesco Sasseti and Ghirlandaio at Santa Trinita, Florence: History and Legend in a Renaissance Chapel (Doornspijk, Holland: Davaco Pubs., 1981), figs. 61, 62.

758. The use of the sea-*thiassos* on Roman sarcophagi has been related to a sepulchral iconography whereby the Nereids represent the souls of the dead transported to the Isles of the Blessed by the Tritons. Jan Bialostocki, "The Sea-Thiassos in Renaissance and Sepulchral Art," in Anthony Blunt, Studies in Renaissance and Baroque Art Presented to Anthony Blunt on his 60th Birthday (London: Phaidon Press, 1967), 69–74.

Sassetti's tomb.<sup>759</sup> Even closer to home, a happy Triton and Nereid pair make their appearance on the ca. 1494 ceiling of the vestibule that links the Santo Spirito sacristy to the church.

While I have not been able to locate specific antique sources for Filippino's paired figures, at least two late quattrocento artists executed images that very much resemble the configuration assumed by Filippino's first centaur and his victim. Pinturricchio devoted one medallion of his 1485–90 coffered ceiling in the Della Rovere palace in Rome to a struggle between Tritons, in which one brandishes a club while the other cowers forward clutching at the victor's mantle (fig. 119). Piero di Cosimo, in turn, included in his decorative ca. 1500 Tritons and Nereids a similar fight, in which the armed assailant raises his weapon and clutches at his opponent's head, while the victim cringes forward, his back flattened, his hand on his attacker's forearm in an apparent effort both to avoid the blow and to beg for mercy (fig. 120). The motif, it seems, was ordinarily reserved for violent encounters between males; its substitution for the peaceful coupling of Nereid and Triton, seen for instance in the Sassetti medallions, violates the joyous emotional tone of the Nereid genre and subverts its easygoing eroticism. Extending that argument, we may say that the role of male and female sexuality within marriage, a question that appears happily settled in the Triton-Nereid medallions of Nera Sassetti's tomb, is raised tumultuously and problematically by Filippino's Nereid sculpture.

Despite the prominent placement of the Triton and Nereid tails in Filippino's relief, the brutal male energy unleashed within the confines of the sculpture is far more

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759. Filippino and his patron Tanai de Nerli, a relative by marriage of the Sassetti clan, were certainly familiar with the Sassetti chapel at Santa Trinita.

characteristic of a different mythological creature, the centaur itself. Filippino has taken care to include the male sea-centaurs' asses' ears and wild hair, thus underlining their affinity to actual centaurs. Since classical antiquity, centaurs were broadly associated with the lust and readiness to violence that provoked their battle against the Lapiths at the wedding of Pirithous and Hippodame.<sup>760</sup> Indeed, in narrative terms, the centaurs' assault against the Lapith maidens may be the closest precedent for Filippino's abbreviated sea-centaur relief. Quattrocento representations of the battle of the Lapiths and the centaurs, most famously the lavish *spalliera* by Piero di Cosimo, encourage the viewer to subdivide the centaur's wild temperament between violence aimed at the Lapith males and lust directed at the females. The particularity of Filippino's vision was to merge the centaur's unbridled lust with his wild brutality. In his Calumny of Apelles, Botticelli conveyed some of the same effect in a small, poorly legible relief that appears to depict exclusively the centaurs' assault on the female Lapiths (fig. 121).<sup>761</sup>

Like satyrs, whom they far surpass in strength and ferocity, centaurs are associated in quattrocento art with a primitive epoch at the dawn of civilization. Both satyrs and centaurs join forces with early humans in Piero di Cosimo's *spalliere* depicting the life of early man, The Hunt and The Return from the Hunt. In the last decade of the century, on the other hand, Renaissance artists appear to have favored depictions of centaurs civilized by love. The topos of the tamed centaur may have derived from Lucian's description of a painting by Zeuxis of a centaur family with its protective father

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760. As recounted in book XII of Ovid's Metamorphoses. Boccaccio discusses centaurs in the Genealogia deorum gentilium, 9:27–34. Geronimus, Piero di Cosimo, 72.

761. Stanley Meltzoff, Botticelli, Signorelli and Savonarola: Theologia Poetica and Painting from Boccaccio to Poliziano (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1987), 167–68.

and nursing mother.<sup>762</sup> The décor of Botticelli's Calumny of Apelles includes, adjacent to the depiction of the rape of the Lapith women, another relief that represents a bound centaur ridden by Eros and pulled along by the forelock by a female figure (fig. 121). Although the precise identity of the female figure may be uncertain,<sup>763</sup> it is clear that in Botticelli's second relief, the centaurs' brutal and indiscriminate sexuality, the theme of the first panel, is now subject to the discipline of love.<sup>764</sup> Filippino's own Wounded Centaur<sup>765</sup> portrays a male centaur, one of Cupid's arrows in his foreleg, thoughtfully examining the god's arsenal of arrows, while a background cave shelters his wife and their young brood.<sup>766</sup> The pervasive character of this topos within Filippino's own artistic circle suggests that the sea-centaurs of the Nerli altarpiece take their place within the history of the evolving demands and benefits of civilization, a history initiated by the requirements of love and family. Within that natural and historical progression,

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762. Lucian, "Zeuxis or Antiochus," in The Works of Lucian in Eight Volumes, trans. and ed. A. M. Harmon, K. Kilburn and M. D. Macleod (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1937) cited in Meltzoff, Botticelli, Signorelli and Savonarola, 141.

763. Meltzoff (Botticelli, Signorelli and Savonarola, 169) associates the woman leading the centaur with a female figure on the tourney banner described by Poliziano in his Giostra (see Salvatore Settis, "Citarea su un impresa di bronconi," Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes, 34 [1971]: 135–77) and with the "Pallas" of Botticelli's Pallas and the Centaur, a female figure who also holds a centaur by the forelock. Accordingly, he identifies this woman in the relief as Venus in the guise of Minerva. See also C. Acidini Luchinat, Botticelli: Allegorie mytologiche (Milan: Electa, 2001).

764. A similar tension between wild license and monogamous devotion gives its emotional and aesthetic resonance to Piero di Cosimo's Battle of the Lapiths and the Centaurs, which foregrounds the tender and doomed love of the refined centaurs Cyllarus and Hylonome against a spectacle of carnage and lust in a wild landscape.

765. Now at the Christ Church Picture Gallery in Oxford. Nelson, "La rinascita dell'antichità," fig. 344.

766. Hugh Lloyd-Jones, "Filippino Lippi's Wounded Centaur," Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes, 32 (1969): 390. Lloyd-Jones argued that Filippino's transposed Ovid's tale of the centaur Chiron, who played with Hercules' quiver and was wounded in the foot, to a centaur at play with Cupid's quiver. However, Filippino's reflective centaur, already wounded by one of Cupid's arrows, intimates that love's civilizing implications reach the psychic dimensions of introspection and self-knowledge.



Filippino's sea-centaurs occupy the lowest rank; their assault on the females—despite the submission of these females—displays male-female relations at their most primitive.

At the same time, the sea-centaur sculpture contributes powerfully to the affective purposes of Filippino's rhetorical undertaking. The relief makes use of classical forms, most obviously in the aggressive posture of the first male centaur and the interwoven serpentine tails of Nereid and Triton. Its alliance of these forms with a strenuous physical movement that evokes and reflects intense feeling associates them with what Aby Warburg famously described as a *pathosformula*.<sup>767</sup> According to Warburg, classically derived images of "intensified physical or psychic expression" were employed by Renaissance artists to depict "life in motion" in the service of an "emotive rhetoric."<sup>768</sup> The violent and erotically charged interactions of Filippino's sea-centaurs comply with Warburg's description of an intense emotive rhetoric expressed through physical motion. Most striking, perhaps, is the powerful "pathos" of the Nereid's furred tail enclosed in the serpentine ripples of the Triton's bifurcated and interlaced tail, a design which functions as an "accessory form in motion," no less than the undulations of hair or drapery favored by Alberti and linked by Warburg to states of excitement and intense emotion.<sup>769</sup> In Filippino's panel the serpentine tails, both trapped and trapping, distill in a purified, intensified and quasi-abstract language the pulsation of physical movement and the resonance of intense feeling.

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767. Warburg, "Francesco Sassetti's Last Injunction," in *Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, 245. Warburg appears to have felt that, in itself, the centaur's restless intensity, its "fiery metal," translated readily into *pathosformulae*, as with the sling-wielding centaurs on the medallions that decorate Francesco Sassetti's tomb at Santa Trinita.

768. Warburg, "Durer and Italian Antiquity," in *Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, 555.

769. Warburg, "Sandro Botticelli's Birth of Venus and Spring: An Examination of the Concepts of Antiquity in the Italian Renaissance (1893)," in *Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, 141.

We noted earlier the role of responsive motion and emotion circulating among the foreground figures of the Nerli altarpiece, emerging in Tanai's excitement at Mary's response to his wife's prayer. Small in scale and monochromatic, the sea-centaur carving nonetheless performs fully as a *pathosformula* injecting terror and energy at the very root of the composition. The "forms in motion" advocated by Alberti were aimed at arousing the emotions of the beholder, and it is to the troubled beholder that Filippino's brutal and erotic image is addressed. Yet, to the extent that the viewer did feel complicit in the action, the brutality of the attack with its subtext of murder may well provoke a contrary reaction of revulsion and even guilt. In that context, we should note Filippino's placement of Catherine's wheel,<sup>770</sup> which overlaps the base of Mary's throne and abuts the sea-centaur sculpture. Propelled by the curved base of Mary's throne, the relief creates a circular rightward momentum that is interrupted by the pronounced curve and implicit motion of Catherine's wheel. In turn, the curving wheel leads the eye back forward and right to the figure of Nanna, and, rising from there, to the circle of gently moving, closely interacting figures. The embrace of lust and the absence of love—and of Christ who is love itself—is displayed in Filippino's frenzied vignette as a kind of agony. In that sense, the circular flow of *caritas*—from Martin to Tanai and Christ, Mary and Catherine to Nanna, Tanai to Nanna—responds not only to the concentrated energies of Filippino's brutal vision but also to the beholder's own reaction to that vision. Just as the viewer was guiltily complicit in the ravages of lust, he is implicated in the responsive and redemptive energy of *caritas*.

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770. Although the wheel is the attribute of Catherine's martyrdom, the saint was in fact beheaded, since God interposed a miracle that broke the wheel on which she was to be executed. Thus, it may be possible to read Catherine's wheel as a multivalent symbol that refers, as well, to God's mercy.

Although the emotive discourse of charity conducted by the figures gathered in their foreground loggia responds actively to the language of violence enacted in the sea-centaur relief, the location of that relief at the base of Mary's throne suggests that it is Mary herself who supersedes and thus negates the evil it portrays. The late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries saw a relative abundance of religious images, in which a female exempla of faith and virtue—usually, but not always, the Virgin—is stationed above and thus supersedes sinfulness, depicted as a sexually suggestive human-animal form.<sup>771</sup> The best-known example of similarly placed representations of sin in Marian altarpieces may be Andrea del Sarto's so-called Madonna of the Harpies, dated ten years after Filippino's work.<sup>772</sup> Filippino himself made repeated use of *a l'antica* siren sculptures. They decorate a table support in his 1496 Madonna and Child with Saints Anthony Abbot, Margaret, Stephen and Catherine of Alexandria (the Prato altarpiece; fig. 122) and are incorporated within Saint Sebastian's pedestal in the 1504 Saint Sebastian with Saints John the Baptist and Francis. Hybrid bird-women figures with women's heads and protruding breasts, these figures are easily recognizable as emblems of sin, particularly the bejeweled sirens of the Prato tabernacle who glance out alluringly at the viewer.<sup>773</sup>

Filippino may have been influenced by Marian altarpieces that include references to the events of the Fall pictured at the base of Mary's throne or, more simply, beneath

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771. Simona Cohen, "Andrea del Sarto's Madonna of the Harpies and the Human-Animal Hybrid in the Renaissance," in Animals as Disguised Symbols in Renaissance Art (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 253, fig. 83; 255, fig. 85; 258, fig. 87. Cohen focuses on the use of this imagery in a Franciscan context, but more generally associates "the popularity of animal-human metaphors in Renaissance literature and art" with "the introspective practices of the mendicant orders" (247).

772. Wittkower and Wittkower, Born under Saturn, supra. n. 191; Cohen, "Madonna of the Harpies," 246.

773. In the Prato fresco, Mary is situated in front of a table supported by the siren caryatids, rather than above it. Nevertheless, the image still clearly conveys the notion of Mary's purity overcoming an unchaste and pagan past.

her.<sup>774</sup> As we have seen in chapter 2, such altarpieces sometimes included the figure of Eve, referring to the Original Sin that Mary overcame as the new Eve (fig. 38).<sup>775</sup> The Nerli altarpiece throne sculpture, in turn, expands the theme of sinful hybrid figures into the realm of classical myth. Freighted as they are with the narrative trappings of antiquity—the marine *thiassos*, the battle of the Lapiths and the Centaurs—Filippino’s sea-centaurs speak about the sins linked to a primitive time *sub natura*, before Jewish law and Christian grace. While the relief narrates in the language of myth an alternative “original sin” that haunts the relations of men and women, its insertion at the base of Mary’s throne proclaims the triumph of love over loveless cupidity.

As we have seen, Filippino inserted another sculpture into Mary’s throne immediately above the sea-centaur relief, a heavily beribboned ram’s head. Executed on a larger scale and thus more prominent and instantly recognizable, the ram’s head is sculpted as if suspended from garlands attached by long ribbons to the ram’s horns. Rams’ heads, garlanded and beribboned as if in preparation for sacrifice, were a reoccurring decorative motif in Roman sculpture.<sup>776</sup> They were used notably to decorate the corners of ancient Roman funereal altars, usually adorned with heavy garlands and

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774. Cohen describes the use of human-animal hybrids within a Marian context as internalizations of the myth of the Fall as the sin of Eve. “Madonna of the Harpies,” 255.

775. Similarly, the central panel of a 1358 triptych by Lippo Vanni displays the enthroned Virgin and Child above crouched figures of Eve and the Serpent. Schiller, *Ikonographie der christlichen Kunst*, 814. A work that is virtually contemporary with the Nerli altarpiece, Mantegna’s 1496 Madonna della Vittoria, perpetuates that tradition, featuring a prominent relief of Adam and Eve on the base of Mary’s throne.

776. A Roman relief depicting a Suovetaurilia procession displays a garlanded bull, ram and pig. The frieze, visible by the end of the fifteenth century, was copied by Renaissance artists who took care to include the garlands draped over the three animals. Bober and Rubenstein, *Renaissance Artists*, 223 and fig. 190 (Louvre, Paris, MA 1096), figs. 190a (Aspertini Album, British Museum, London), 190b (Ripanda sketchbook., Ashmolean Museum, Oxford). Filippino would also have seen a candelabra base decorated with such rams’ heads, located at Santa Costanza in Rome during the fifteenth century and the source of motifs for his later Strozzi chapel frescoes. Nelson, “La rinascita dell’antichità,” 443, fig. 370.

curling ribbons attached to the horns of the ram, precisely as depicted in the Nerli altarpiece (figs. 123, 124). Classical altars decorated with beribboned rams' heads were a part of the Renaissance classical repertoire; for instance the altar in Raphael's 1515 Sacrifice at Lystra is of this type (fig. 125). The table located behind the standing Madonna and Child in Filippino's Prato tabernacle is ornamented with rams' heads as well as sirens (fig. 122). At the same time, in its dimensions and general appearance that table resembles a Christian altar. In the Nerli altarpiece, the highly visible inclusion of a ram's head with prominent sacrificial ribbons and garlands within the Madonna's throne also suggests that that throne, on which Mary and her child are seated, belonged to and has been carved out of an ancient Roman altar. The reference ultimately is to the sacrifice of Christ, ritually reenacted through the Eucharist on the actual altar situated below the Nerli altarpiece.

Quattrocento art did make use of pagan sacrificial motifs to allude to the self-sacrifice of Christ and to the sacrament of the Eucharist.<sup>777</sup> One example is the inclusion of a marble relief depicting a classical libation ceremony in the middle-ground parapet of Giovanni Bellini's The Wounds of the Saviour. In that case, the wine poured onto the altar in the relief serves as a visual parallel for the blood shed by Christ.<sup>778</sup> Signorelli's work, begun in 1499, in the chapel of San Brizio in the Cathedral of Orvieto, also

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777. F. Saxl, "Pagan Sacrifice in the Italian Renaissance," Journal of the Warburg Institute 2, no. 4 (1939): 346–67.

778. Ibid., 350–52. For a somewhat different reading see Thomas Troy, "Classical Reliefs and Statues in Later Quattrocento Religious Paintings" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1980), 246–51. More broadly, the use of classical sacrificial imagery to allude to Christian sacrificial truths was encouraged by beliefs, adopted by Florentine humanists from Petrarch and Boccaccio to Salutati and Poliziano, in a *theologia poetica*, the utterance of Christian verities in the guise of poetic *figurae* assumed to have been practiced since earliest times. Meltzoff, Botticelli, Signorelli and Savonarola, 5–21; Trinkaus, "From Theologia Poetica to Theologia Platonica," in Our Image, 2:683–721; Rowland, The Culture of the High Renaissance, 46–47.

included scenes that depict Nereids and Tritons assiduously performing sacrifices before pagan altars. The depiction of these sea-creatures in no way suggests sin; in one case, the altar supports the image of a distinctly cruciform goddess, while in another, the sacrifice is performed by a family group whose infant is tenderly nursed by its Nereid mother (fig. 126). Meltzoff has argued that the presence of the Nereids signals a mythological dawn of time and of civilization and that their sacrifices, as depicted by Signorelli, should be read as prefigurations of Christian Eucharistic ritual.<sup>779</sup> A broader example of the use of pagan myth to refer to the Christian faith and practice is the fresco cycle painted between 1493 and 1495 by Pinturicchio in the Sala dei Santi in the Borgia Apartment of the Vatican. Pinturicchio's fresco cycle described the worship and the sacrificial dismemberment of the Egyptian god Osiris and his subsequent resurrection and cult as the bull Apis. The worship of Osiris-Apis is evidently displayed in these frescoes as a proto-Christian theology prefiguring the veneration of Christ.<sup>780</sup>

If pagan sacrifice generally could be read to allude to Christian sacrifice, the ram garlanded for sacrifice could in turn be read as a figure of Christ, the Christian sacrificial victim.<sup>781</sup> The beribboned ram is featured as a frequent victim in Roman representation of sacrificial ceremonies. Representations of the Suovetorilia,<sup>782</sup> marriage ceremonies (fig.

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779. Meltzoff, Botticelli, Signorelli and Savonarola, 338 and n. 94.

780. Brian Curran, The Egyptian Renaissance: The Afterlife of Ancient Egypt in Early Modern Italy (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 110–18.

781. In one telling circumstance, Filippino avoided the use of garlanded rams' heads. To depict the temple of Mars in the Strozzi chapel fresco of Saint Philip Banishing the Dragon, Filippino made use of an existing ornamented candelabra base (Nelson, "La rinascita dell'antichità," 443, fig. 370) as a pedestal for a statue of the god. However, he replaced the rams' heads on either side of the base with the heads of birds of prey. He may have thought that the sacrificial connotation of the ram, as well as its gentler affect, was not appropriate to the temple's negative charge.

782. *Supra*, n. 214.

127) and Bacchic rituals (fig. 128) all included the sacrifice of a ram. Thus, whether or not we are to read Mary's throne in the Nerli altarpiece as carved out of or formed from a pagan altar, there is reason to believe that Filippino's ram's head functions as a sign of Roman sacrifice, which refers in turn to the sacrifice of Christ and its celebration in the Mass. The rams' heads are included on the painted pier pilasters in Filippino's Carafa chapel. Garlanded rams' heads are incorporated in the capitals of the pier pilasters facing the altar wall, while the pilaster candelabra framing that wall contain grisaille heads that closely resemble the Nerli altarpiece ram's head, despite the substitution of elongated gilded goat's horns for curled ram's horns (fig. 129). In her monograph on Filippino's Carafa chapel, Gail L. Geiger argued that the imagery in the capitals facing the altar wall and on the pilasters framing that wall expands the sacrificial and ultimately Eucharistic references found elsewhere in the chapel.<sup>783</sup> The historiated cameos that are the focal elements of the altar-wall candelabra depict a bound human figure led by a gilded cord to a shrine, a scene that, according to Geiger, refers to human sacrifice.<sup>784</sup> Sorrowful, semi-human figures with the goat horns and ears of Pan support the cameos from below and are attached to suspended lion skins.<sup>785</sup> The cameos are topped by the rams' heads,

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783. Geiger, *Carafa Chapel*, 175. Enrico Parlato, "L'antico," 115, discusses sacrificial and specifically Eucharistic images on the frieze on the west wall entablature, noting that Thomas Aquinas, patron of the Carafa Chapel, was the author of the liturgy of the Corpus Domini.

784. Parlato, "L'antico," 117; Geiger, *Carafa Chapel*, 172–73.

785. Parlato, "L'antico," 117, notes the lion skin's association with Hercules, held up as a type for Christ in Pierre Bersuire's *Ovidius Moralizatus* and in Boccaccio's *Genealogia Deorum*. Troy, "Classical Reliefs," 257–58. Bacchic rituals, which involved the sacrifice of rams and goats, the flaying of sacrificed animals and the wearing of their pelts, may be relevant to the meaning of the altar-wall candelabra. The mythology of Bacchus, whose awakening of Ariadne was assimilated to the resurrection of the Christian soul after death, had already been invested by the quattrocento with a Christian significance. Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (New York: Norton and Co., 1968), 154–56; Meltzoff, *Botticelli, Signorelli and Savonarola*, 161. The goatish features of the supporting figures, humans and rams, and the presence of lion skins—lions are depicted among the animal retinue of Bacchus—suggest that the skins

which, in turn, are linked to hoofed animals with human faces. Like the human figure in the cameos, the creatures caught in the candelabra—as well as the lion skins—are all tightly bound and linked to one another and to the cameos by a heavy, garland-like chain whose gilding stands out conspicuously against the grisaille of the candelabra.<sup>786</sup> In other words, the altar-wall pilasters display humans, hybrids and animals, all bound and all linked to each other along a chain that appears to assert their equivalence as participants in a common sacrificial fate and, thus, insists upon the fundamental unity of the sacrificial act, be it animal or human, pagan or Christian. Geiger has linked the reference to human sacrifice in the cameos to the Mass performed on the altar table set between the pier pilasters of the altar wall.<sup>787</sup> If that Eucharistic reference is correct, it is surely Christ's image that is refracted through multiple guises as the lion skins, the human-animal hybrids and the bound and garlanded rams' heads.

Given the prominence of rams as Roman sacrificial victims, their association with the decoration of Roman altars and, more specifically, Filippino's own use of rams' heads to allude to altars and sacrifice, it seems very likely that the heavily beribboned sacrificial ram's head carved into the Madonna's throne in the Nerli altarpiece functions as a sign of Christ's sacrifice. It does so indirectly, by associating Mary's throne with the altar that supports the Christ Child, and directly, as a sign of the crucial sacrificial victim at the center of the Christian faith. Indeed, while the Christ Child reaches for the cross

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may be *nebris*, the skins of ritually sacrificed animals commonly worn by Bacchus and his followers. For instance, Michelangelo's *Bacchus* holds a *nebris* by one hand as noted by Luba Freedman, "Michelangelo's Reflection on Bacchus," *Artibus et Historiae*, 24, 47 (2003): 130. About the pelt held by Michelangelo's *Bacchus*, Wind asserted bluntly, "The flayed animal skin signified death, and ... that kind of death is associated with Bacchus." *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*, 185.

786. Parlano describes the goat-horned figures who support the cameos as "prigioni." "L'antico," 117.

787. Geiger, *Carafa Chapel*, 173.



with one dangling arm, the pitched angle of his body across Mary's lap points the Child's legs and feet directly at the ram's head carving, thus affirming in pictorial terms the significant correspondence between them.

### **3. Marriage and Charity**

The classical sculptures of the Virgin's throne are capped by an armrest that remains unused since Mary's body faces slightly toward her right. As a result, the carved sea-centaur vignette and the ram's head above it are topped by the Nerli family gathering visible in the courtyard beyond the loggia. As I noted earlier, the overall field of representation set out in quattrocento altarpieces might include a detail, groups of details or entire panel sections that lent themselves to independent horizontal or vertical readings that reject distinctions based on pictorial depth. This is the case here, where the vertical space composed of the throne sculptures and the Nerli family vignette includes both foreground and background elements. What a surface reading illuminates in this case is the contrast between a scene of frenzied sexual cupidity—albeit assigned to mythological actors and presented as a classical artifact—and the loving and ordered interaction of one of the Nerlis, his wife and their child. The distinctions are evident: loveless lust, rape and the possibility of murder have been replaced by *caritas*—a mother who tends to her family and a father who affectionately embraces his young child.

A reading of the sea-centaur relief that connects it to and contrasts it with the familial embrace displayed above orients our perception of the relief in a specifically Augustinian direction—towards charity. In his—or her—ultimate rejection of the sea-centaurs' brutality, the beholder has something in common with the reader of the scriptures to whom Augustine's De Doctrina Christiana is addressed. When such a

reader comes across “anything ... that seems to command infamy or crime, or to forbid usefulness or kindness...,” then, writes Augustine, “it is figurative.”<sup>788</sup> Such passages, he tells us, “you should take pains to turn over and over in your mind ... until your interpretation of it is led right through to the kingdom of charity.”<sup>789</sup> The raping centaurs and sexually available females at the heart of the City of God have the effect of a wound at the heart of the image, one that must be treated, or interpreted, with charity.<sup>790</sup>

To phrase the issue somewhat differently, the presence of the sea-centaur carving compels the viewer to address the role of sexuality and of relationships characterized by inequality of power within a family governed by charity. The loving interaction of the Nerlis tells us that, under the rule of charity, sexuality remains part of marriage, but it is refined and monogamous, subject to the strictures of love, and its ultimate purpose is the growth of the family through procreation. At the same time the equation of dominance with service, imaged in the pilgrim’s father bending down to embrace his child, is Christian love’s reversal of the brute power exercised by the male sea-centaurs. The family vignette in front of the Nerli palazzo demonstrates the value of *caritas* as enacted in marriage; as such it is both a sublimation and a redemption of the raw sexuality and brutal oppression portrayed at the base of Mary’s throne.

Located, figuratively and literally, between a mythical state *sub natura*, in which all male and female interaction is reduced to rape, and the loving and united family exemplified by the Nerlis, hangs the beribboned ram, sign of Christ’s sacrifice and

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788. Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, III, 16, 24, 180.

789. Ibid., III, 15, 23, 179.

790. Spence, *Rhetorics of Reason*, 100. Discussing Augustine’s hermeneutics of charity, Spence states, “Our job as readers is to locate the wounds in the text—the spots where the text is not of a piece—and through our reading bandage the text.”

testimony of his love for mankind. As we have seen, Eucharistic references were often used in the late quattrocento to communicate rhetorically the depth of Christ's love and the need to live one's life in imitation of that love.<sup>791</sup> In Filippino's pictorial oratory, Christ's "new commandment"—"as I have loved you, that you also love one another" (John 13:34)<sup>792</sup>—which sets up Divine Love as the model for all human interactions, applies to the bonds that link husband, wife and children. Through Christ's sacrifice, we rise from the bestial to an era *sub gratia*, in which the relations between these husbands, wives and children who belong to the City of God are nourished and molded by Christ's own charity.

#### **4. *Theologia Poetica* in the Nerli Altarpiece**

As Ronald M. Steinberg has pointed out, the influence of Savonarola on the style and content of late quattrocento Florentine art at the time of his cultural, social and political ascendancy is extremely difficult to trace.<sup>793</sup> In the case of the Nerli altarpiece, I want to suggest the possibility that Filippino's highly ornamented foreground loggia and the saturation of that ornament with Christian meaning serves an anti-Savonarolan rhetorical agenda. Savonarola himself in no way rejected Christian art, and in fact, referred in one sermon to the use of art as a powerful aid to meditation and prayer.<sup>794</sup> However, he appears to have found in the values of simplicity, clarity and transparency of intent, applied to church architecture and décor as well as to religious sculpture and

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791. McManamon, "Renaissance Preaching," 362.

792. "This is my commandment, that you love one another, as I have loved you" (John 15: 12).

793. Steinberg, *Fra Girolamo Savonarola, Florentine Art, and Renaissance Historiography* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1977).

794. *Ibid.*, 8–9, 48.

painting, the expressive criteria for the humility and authentic religious feeling that justified the very notion of Christian art. He excoriated the Florentine aesthetic of display in churches, urging a return to the simplicity of the early church.<sup>795</sup> Clearly, the Dominican's endorsement of what can be described as the rhetorical "plain style" differs radically from Filippino's "grand style" used, under the sway of a very different aesthetic, to define the Nerli altarpiece loggia as the City of God.

We noted earlier that the pilasters and capitals of the loggia's architecture are very probably derived from Nero's Domus Aurea in Rome. The relief carvings on the pilasters are also recognizably derived from a well-known Roman prototype, the frieze of sacrificial instruments and naval symbols embedded in the walls of S. Lorenzo fuori le Mura. The same may be said of the throne sculptures, particularly the garlanded ram, a typical decoration of ancient Roman candelabra bases and funereal altars. If, as we argued, the loggia refers to Santo Spirito, then we must also concede that Santo Spirito here looks a great deal like Rome. The distinctly Roman character of Filippino's ornaments may primarily reflect the artist's own interests in classical motifs, which he had recently encountered and enthusiastically copied in Rome. It is true, however, that, beginning in 1494, Savonarola consistently and fervently preached Florence's role as the chosen city, the New Jerusalem.<sup>796</sup> During the same period, Pope Alexander VI made repeated attempts, beginning in 1495, to restrict Savonarola's preaching, finally excommunicating the Dominican in the spring of 1497. The traditional institutional and political ties between the order of the Augustinian Hermits and the papacy make it very

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795. Ibid., 53–55.

796. "I announce this good news to the city, that Florence will be more glorious, richer, more powerful than she has ever been ... and you, O Florence, will be the reformation of all Italy." *Prediche sopra Aggeo*, ed. Luigi Firpo (Rome: A. Belardetti, 1965), 166–67, cited in Weinstein, *Savonarola and Florence*, 143.

likely that the Hermits, even the largely Florentine convent of Santo Spirito, reacted negatively to Savonarola's aggrandizement of Florence at the expense of Rome. Thus, it is possible that the Roman motifs that decorate the Nerli altarpiece loggia may allude to the preeminence of Rome—and not Florence—within Christian history.

More significant than the presence of Roman ornament is the character of the sculptures that decorate Mary's throne and the Christian rhetorical purpose to which they are dedicated. In about 1492, Savonarola had completed a pamphlet on the use of poetic imagery for Christian edification, the Apologeticus de ratione poeticae artis, whose fourth and last section was revealingly entitled "On the nature, utility, and malignity to the souls of Christians of the art of poetry."<sup>797</sup> The preacher's intent was to reject broadly the use of poetic ornament as useless to the soul's understanding of God, as an instigation to and evidence of *superbia* and as a corruption of the original simplicity of the scriptures. "Sullyng the word of God, they have filled pages with the haughtiest obscurities and the emptiest verbal adornments, with a wisdom that is foolish before God and pompous rhetorical verbiage that is hateful to God..."<sup>798</sup> More specifically, Savonarola excoriated the use of classical narratives and topoi: "Poets ... nourish the tender minds of the young with their lies and juvenile, wicked, and lustful tales of gods, and fill their pure and unprotected intellects first with falsehoods and then with the filthy, abominable superstitions of idolators, and inflame their lusts of the flesh."<sup>799</sup>

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797. Girolamo Savonarola, "Apologeticus de ratione poeticae artis," in Scritti filosofici, ed. Giancarlo Garfagnini and Eugenio Garin (Rome : A. Belardetti, 1982), cited in Meltzoff, Botticelli, Signorelli and Savonarola, 41–57.

798. Savonarola, "Apologeticus," 17:10–18, cited in Meltzoff, 47.

799. *Ibid.*, 26, 36–38, cited in Meltzoff, 51.

It is within a Florentine culture pervaded by the theology of this writer that Filippino placed the Virgin upon a throne decorated with a vivid scene of rape perpetrated by hybrid figures from pagan mythology. Moreover, the Eucharistic reference expressed in the classical sacrificial motif of the ram's head would have been equally offensive to Savonarola's sensibility: "Not knowing Scripture and the virtue of God, under the name of the most loathsome and lustful Jove and other false gods and unchaste goddesses and nymphs, they censure our omnipotent and ineffable Creator."<sup>800</sup> Given Savonarola's fame in Florence, it is likely that Tanai de Nerli and the Augustinian Hermits of Santo Spirito would have been aware of the extent to which Mary's throne, with its recondite argument, shrouded in imagery, about Christianity's influence on marital love, its brutal and lustful sea-centaurs and its pagan sacrificial victim, would have been offensive to Savonarola.

In fact, the well-known anti-Savonarolan stance of both Tanai and the Augustinian Hermits further increases the likelihood that Filippino's exhibition of "obscurities" and classical poetic topoi was aimed at Savonarola. As discussed in chapters 1 and 5 above, the Hermits as well as other mendicant orders were strenuously opposed to Savonarola's dominance, an attitude that may have played an important role in the iconography of Piero di Cosimo's Visitation. For his part, Tanai and his sons Benedetto and Jacopo are named by Guicciardini among the active opponents of the Dominican preacher.<sup>801</sup> It thus seems quite likely that Tanai and his sons would have agreed to suggestions offered by the Augustinian friars and by Filippino himself to depict

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800. Ibid, 30:4–8, cited in Meltzoff, 53.

801. Supra, n. 21.

Christian truth in the language of classical myth and religious ritual in part, at least, because such language was condemned by the Dominican preacher.

One more feature of Filippino's composition argues in favor of this position and, more generally, supports the view that the classical ornaments of the altarpiece are susceptible to a Christian interpretation. I noted that the clawed wheel of Saint Catherine of Alexandria abuts the tangled, straining bodies that adorn so uncomfortably the base of the Virgin's throne. Their proximity, in fact, makes it difficult to read the carved base—which we are clearly meant to do—without also looking at the wheel; it is as if the artist intended that we perceive both images together. Saint Catherine, an early Christian virgin martyr, particularly dear to the Nerlis, was also a favorite of the Augustinian Hermits.<sup>802</sup> The most salient event of Catherine's biography, aside from her martyrdom, was her besting of fifty philosophers gathered by the order of the emperor Maxentius to defeat her arguments in support of Christianity. By the strength of her reasoning, Catherine reduced the philosophers to silence and eventually converted them all, much to the emperor's fury. De Voragine, in his extremely influential *Life of the saint*,<sup>803</sup> dwells on the episode with relish and was quite explicit about the nature of the education that made Catherine's eloquence possible and about the nature of her arguments. "Catherine," he tells us, "was fully instructed in all the liberal studies." In her first encounter with the emperor, she argues "by syllogistic reasoning as well as by allegory and metaphor, logical and mystical inference." Later, when the wise men state that it is impossible for God to become human, "Catherine showed that this had been predicted even by pagans.

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802. *Supra*, chap. 1 n. 178.

803. Katherine J. Lewis, *The Cult of St Katherine of Alexandria in Late Medieval England* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2000), 9–10.

Plato affirms a God beset and mutilated. The Sibyl, too, speaks as follows: ‘Happy that God who hangs from a high tree!’”<sup>804</sup> In other words, Catherine makes use of *theologica poetica*, the view that many of the conceits of classical poetry expressed in concealed, “poetic” form the truth of the Christian narrative. Moreover, in silencing her antagonists with such arguments, she demonstrates that they may legitimately be used as a component of persuasive Christian discourse. As a result of De Voragine’s account, beginning in the 1300s Catherine’s life was believed to epitomize the harmony between *sophia sacra* and *sapientia humana*.<sup>805</sup>

Given this vita, it is not surprising that the Augustinian Hermits of Sant’Agostino dedicated to her their chapter house adorned with a 1335–38 Maestà by Ambrogio Lorenzetti, which still survives. According to Ghiberti, the fresco decoration on the chapter house walls portrayed, among other scenes, her exhortation to Maxentius and her dispute with the philosophers. Max Seidel argued convincingly that these frescoes were executed for the occasion of the general chapter of the Hermits, held at Sant’Agostino in 1358.<sup>806</sup> The eminent friar Jordan of Saxony took part in this general chapter and praised Catherine above all for her mastery of both secular and sacred knowledge.<sup>807</sup>

Given this background, it seems very unlikely that the placement of Catherine’s wheel in the Nerli altarpiece is purely a matter of form and rhythm. It lies over the edge of the throne’s socle and is pushed up to the base of the throne. Indeed, it is tempting to say that the location of the wheel creates the impression that it is literally buttressing the

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804. De Voragine, Golden Legend, 334–36.

805. Seidel, “Die Fresken des Ambrogio Lorenzetti,” 204.

806. Seidel, “Die Fresken des Ambrogio Lorenzetti,” 204.

807. “Ex quod patet, quod potenter ex isa refulserit non solum radius sapientiae divinae, verum etiam humanae: quia in omni scientia humana peritissima legitur et provecta.” Ibid. and n. 78.



base of the throne, just as the saint herself supported the use of poetry and mythology to foretell and express a Christian truth. The images carved on the throne and the wheel together may be read as a forceful argument about the use of poetry and myth to move and to teach; in other words, to convey Christian values in a rhetorically powerful and fully persuasive manner.<sup>808</sup>

Thus, if we can surmise that Filippino's painting delivers a critique of Savonarola's highly restrictive views on the use of poetic images in a Christian context, we should be careful to formulate this rhetorical purpose in positive as well as negative terms. In the spirit of Augustine's own embrace of symbol and metaphor in his De Doctrina Christiana, Filippino's painting argues for the use of classical ornament and pictorial *figurae* as fully expressive and emotionally convincing rhetorical strategies in the enterprise of imparting Christian values, specifically the core Christian value of *caritas*.

## **5. Charity and the Nerli Family**

Filippino's panel thus displays the Nerli marriage, within both the City of Man and the City of God, as part of an Augustinian spiritual discourse saturated with *caritas*, as modeled by Saint Martin and by Christ himself. Remaining mindful of Patricia Simmons's prompting to recognize within Renaissance portraiture the deliberate construction of social identity, rather than transparent expression of individual personality, we may read the patron's conduct within the multilayered drama of the painting as a self-presentation in a role whose defining character is Charity. Filippino, in

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808. The prominence of the Disputation of Saint Catherine among the 1493–95 frescoes by Pinturricchio in the Sala dei Santi in the Vatican suggests that the fresco served not only as a reference to Alexander VI's name and to city of Alexandria in Egypt, as suggested by Curran (Egyptian Renaissance, 108–109), but also helped support the claim that the scenes of Egyptian mythology involving Osiris and Apis displayed on the ceiling were a foretelling of Christ's Passion.

other words, has cast Tanai de Nerli in the role of Augustine's pilgrim *pater familias* who imbues with charity his relations with his wife, his children and his household.

Tanai de Nerli was a wealthy patrician merchant and landowner who moved in elite Florentine circles. He played a particularly important role in his city's political affairs at the time of Charles VII's invasion and Piero de' Medici's fall. Piero Parenti tells us that, among other positions, in 1494 Tanai was elected as one of the *accoppiatori* who chose the members of the Signoria for the next year, ensuring that his favored candidate was elected *gonfaloniere di giustizia*. In 1495, Tanai himself was again elected *gonfaloniere*. He was also charged, along with Bernardo di Niccolo Capponi, with the delicate task of tracing and valuing the goods abandoned in Florence by the Medici. Parenti describes him as an astute political operator.<sup>809</sup> Why, shortly after these events occurred, would such a man exhibit himself, in the most important church of the Oltrarno, as an ideal husband and father?

Writing about Nanna's presence in the altarpiece, Nelson argued, in essence, that she had been included as a signifier of the Nerli lineage.<sup>810</sup> Yet concern with lineage is but one aspect of a broader and more complex preoccupation with family, the expectations imposed by its past, its present rewards and its future promise, and its integration into wider social networks and the emotional and spiritual significance of the bonds it establishes. Thus, Tanai's concern with family may well have emerged from a patrician resonance to the example set by prior generations and a sensitivity—rendered

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809. Piero Parenti, *Storia Fiorentina* in Joseph Schnitzer, *Quellen und Forschungen zur Geschichte Savonarolas* (Munich: J.J. Lentner [E. Stahl, jun.] 1902–04), IV, 20, 42. On the other hand, Guicciardini, writing in 1508, describes him as “of not much worth in matters of government.” Francesco Guicciardini, *History of Italy and History of Florence*, ed. and abridged John R. Hale, trans. Cecil Grayson (New York: Washington Square Press, 1964), 41. The remark is surprising given the large number of posts with which Tanai was entrusted.

810. Nelson, “La posizione dei ritratti,” 464.

acute by the young Tanai's experience of exile—to the family's long-lasting reputation within Florence. It is surely significant, in this context, that the Nerlis had been memorialized by Dante in a powerful image of familial order and prosperous sobriety: "I saw dei Nerli and del Vecchio content in plain buff and their ladies at the spindle and flax. O favored women!"<sup>811</sup>

An equally if not more significant factor governing the character of Tanai's self-presentation at Santo Spirito is surely the relationship between the Nerlis and their *parentade*, the Capponi. Contemporary studies of marriage in Renaissance Florence have focused on the integration of the marriage and its progeny within the patrilineal line to the exclusion of the bride's family and to the detriment of the bride's status.<sup>812</sup> On the other hand, Anthony Molho and others have noted the high degree of intermarriage among members of the Florentine ruling elite, the commonality of values, interests and mores and the preexisting ties of amity that existed within that elite.<sup>813</sup> It is very much as a part of a shared social and cultural milieu that the Nerli-Capponi marriage took place. Both families were neighbors with deep roots in the Oltrarno district; both were wealthy. The Capponi were socially and politically prominent, while the Nerli belonged to one of the great magnate families of fourteenth-century Florence. It seems likely that the parity

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811. *Paradiso*, Canto xv, 115–17.

812. See generally Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family and Ritual*. Already in 1985, however, David Herlihy wondered if contemporary research had not underestimated the supportive and affective role of the in-laws, the *parentade*, within the patrilineal familial unit. Herlihy, foreword to Klapisch-Zuber, *Women, Family and Ritual* vii–xi, ix–x.

813. Anthony Molho, "Marriages in the Ruling Class," in *Marriage Alliance in Late Medieval Florence* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 233–97; Francis W. Kent, "Un Paradiso habitato da Diavoli," in *Le Radici Cristiane di Firenze*, eds. Anna Benvenuti, Franco Cardini, Elena Giannarelli with Fresco Bandini (Florence: Alinea, 1994), 193. Kent (194) insists: "Florentine women felt loyalty to their agnatic kin, Florentine men to their maternal *parenti*. The webs of kinship... were as complicated as they were dense and over-lapping, and their very importance as a mechanism of social and political survival made them also the focus of intense feelings, and not exclusively an over-weaning commitment to male *consorti*."

of both families in terms of social standing, relative wealth and commonality of interests encouraged friendship and political alliance. At the time the altarpiece was commissioned, certainly, the Nerli and the Capponi were close political allies, opponents of Piero de' Medici and supporters of oligarchical rule within the new republic.

As we noted at the outset, the relations between the Capponi and the Nerli are important to an understanding of the circumstances of Tanai's altarpiece commission and to the role of family within the painting. The Nerli chapel was located in Santo Spirito's right transept, where the Capponi of different branches and their relatives by marriage were ultimately to occupy six chapels. Tanai thus purchased his chapel in Capponi territory, acting as a Capponi relative. This purchase, along with the agreement to participate in Santo Spirito's *opera*, may have been a benefit or more simply a favor conferred upon the Capponi, who, as longtime patrons of the Augustinians, were probably inclined to encourage wealthy friends and associates to purchase chapels.<sup>814</sup> At the same time, the Capponi were extending a benefit to Tanai, who was given the opportunity to buy a chapel in a prestigious location in an important church and to participate in an *opera*, whose prestige can be gauged by the fact that Lorenzo de' Medici became himself a member in 1490.<sup>815</sup> In other words, what took place was an exchange of favors from which both parties benefited, and one in which honor, as much as chapels and altarpieces, was the medium of exchange.<sup>816</sup>

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814. We know that Tanai lent funds to the Santo Spirito *opera* several times during the 1490s. *Supra*, n. 33.

815. Tanai took advantage of his membership in the *opera* to try to purchase a chapel near the church entrance for one of his friends. *Supra*, n. 34.

816. Rubin, *Images and Identity*, 61.

The altarpiece commissioned by Tanai accordingly reflects this institutional and familial context. Any respect shown to Nanna and favorable acknowledgment of the family life that Tanai shared with Nanna redounded to the honor of her family of origin, the Capponi. Tanai's highly unusual decision—at least at Santo Spirito—to place the Capponi coat of arms on the altarpiece frame below Nanna's donor portrait is a gesture of respect towards the Capponi, a gesture whose benefit Nanna herself shared. In fact, it might be misleading here to insist upon a one-dimensional reading of Tanai's motivations and Nanna's reactions. We may legitimately assume that Tanai acted with the consciousness that Nanna saw her own interests as deeply interwoven with those of her family of origin, as well as with those of the family into which she married. Respect shown to the Capponi by her husband was, as well, respect shown to her. Indeed, Tanai's displays of charitable feeling in the painting are sufficiently personalized to suggest that they were intended to redound to Nanna, as well as to her powerful and prominent family.

Other factors that surely influenced the subject matter of the altarpiece and the values it expressed were the length of the marriage, a remarkable fifty-three years, and the astonishing number of children produced by the Nerli-Capponi marriage, nine boys and six girls, fifteen in all. In a society in which the continuation of the male line was of paramount importance and in which childhood mortality was rife, the marriage must have seemed extraordinarily—perhaps miraculously—successful. The social status conferred upon Tanai by his large number of sons is suggested by Guicciardini, who describes him as “a noble man and very rich and powerful because of the number of his children.”<sup>817</sup> Significantly, the Nerli altarpiece may not be Tanai's sole effort to memorialize his

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817. Guicciardini, “Storie Florentine,” 41.

family, and most particularly his sons and their mother. As we noted, in 1463, he commissioned from Neri de Bicci an altarpiece, Santa Felicita and Her Sons, for a chapel that he had purchased in the Oltrarno church of Santa Felicita (fig. 86). The subject matter was entirely appropriate for that church, since Saint Felicity was an ancient Roman martyr who died along with her seven sons. However, it is surely more than a coincidence that, at the time of the commission, Tanai and Nanna had, indeed, seven sons, the last one, Jacopo, born in 1461. The composition of the altarpiece, in which a monumental Santa Felicita sits in an architecturally elaborate throne surrounded by her sons, is characteristic of Neri de Bicci. While the saint's features appear to be too regular to constitute a portrait, de Bicci clearly varied the facial traits, as well as the coloring of the seven sons. Indeed, the painter lavished a great deal of care on the sons' appearance; they are depicted at different ages, standing in diverse poses and wearing elaborately ornamented and gilt versions of quattrocento garb. The treatment of the sons—in addition to the coincidence of dates—strongly suggests that Tanai wished, through this commission, to memorialize his seven sons and their mother and to give thanks to God for their continuing survival.<sup>818</sup>

While contemporary scholarship has taught us much about the economic and social complexities of the Florentine marriage, it has had greater difficulty in discovering how Florentine ruling-class culture defined the values that should govern the personal bonds between husband and wife. Matteo Palmieri, writing in the 1430s, pitched his

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818. At the time of the Santo Spirito altarpiece commission, moreover, Tanai had reason to feel that several of these sons had shown themselves worthy of the family name. Benedetto served as Florentine envoy and ambassador for the republic on several occasions. Bernardo and Neri de Nerli had printed at their expense a 1488 edition of the works of Homer (Nelson, "La posizione de ritratti," 461 and n. 50). Jacopo, at a young age, was *Gonfaloniere di Compagnia* and played a pivotal role in the fall of Piero de Medici. Guidi, Cio che accadde al tempo, 26, 36.

argument for common customs between husband and wife, in terms of their attaining a “perfecto amore.”<sup>819</sup> Something of the culture’s concern with the character of these intimate relations emerges from Julius Kirschner’s discussion of the considerable nuptial gifts expected of the Florentine groom. He concludes that these gifts played an important role in “fostering interpersonal bonds between bride and bridegroom,” including “marital love, fidelity and intimacy,” in a culture in which neither party was personally acquainted with the other.<sup>820</sup> That such bonds were indeed formed, at least in some cases, is evident from the merchant Francesco Sassetti’s well-known “Memorandum of my Last Wishes,” a letter written to his sons while in his sixties. His last expressed wish refers to his wife Madonna Nera:

To ... your mother accord the reverence that I would show if I were alive; she is, as you are aware, a woman worthy of great praise. She has been a sweet and gentle companion to me, and I have loved and cherished her as much as my own life. Honor her and do all her bidding; permit her to enjoy that part of our worldly goods that I have set aside for her and all the rest as long as she may live.<sup>821</sup>

The attitude of Sassetti, a relative by marriage of Tanai’s,<sup>822</sup> may be doubly relevant here. As we have seen, Nera’s tomb at Santa Trinita is decorated with roundels depicting happily coupled Nereids and sea-centaurs, while Francesco’s tomb decoration includes an idealized portrait of the patron in his youth and his young wife. Borsook has

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819. Matteo Palmieri, *Vita civile*, ed. Gino Belloni (Florence: Sansoni, 1982), 156, 157, 161.

820. Julius Kirshner, “*Li Emergente Bisogni Matrimoniali* in Renaissance Florence,” in *Society and Individual in Renaissance Florence*, ed. William J. Connell (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 79–109.

821. Aby Warburg, “Francesco Sassetti’s Last Injunction,” in *Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, 239.

822. Sassetti’s daughter Lisabetta, in her first marriage, wed Tanai’s son Giovanni Battista.

interpreted these funereal reliefs as allusions to Francesco and Nera's happy marriage.<sup>823</sup>

Nelson has suggested that Nera's presence in Sassetti's frescoed chapel at Santa Trinita may have influenced Tanai to include Nanna in his Santo Spirito altarpiece.<sup>824</sup> More broadly, the decoration of the Sassetti tombs may well have encouraged Tanai to display himself in terms of marital and familial bonds.

The familial affectivity evoked in the altarpiece is very specifically inscribed within the broader spirituality of Christian *caritas*. One function of charity here may be to project onto family connections attitudes of warmth and freedom capable of transcending the relations of negotiated exchange prevailing within Florentine society as a whole.<sup>825</sup> Dale Kent has written of the role played by Christian love in setting the standard for and defining the nature of friendship.<sup>826</sup> In something of the same spirit, Sassetti, in the letter quoted above, entreated his sons to live in *amore et carita* and show towards each other *la vostra carita et benivolenza fraterna*.<sup>827</sup> The foregrounding of familial *carita* in the Nerli altarpiece suggests as well that Tanai's self-presentation as Christian father and husband serves not only to assert his own honor, that of his family and of their *parentade*, the Capponi. It is as well prescriptive and focused on his extensive male progeny. The uncertain identities of the figures in the mid-ground

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823. Borsook and Offerhaus, Francesco Sassetti, 26.

824. Nelson, "La posizione dei ritratti," 462.

825. Klapish-Zuber, Women, Family, and Ritual, 89. In somewhat similar terms, Klapish-Zuber talks of "the exchange of free favors ... between 'friends,'" noting that "in a society in which every penny was counted—*amore* introduced a certain freedom of action."

826. Kent, Friendship, 11, 66. Kent (Friendship, 93) notes as well Augustine's pronouncement in The Confessions: "There is no friendship unless you weld it between souls that cleave together through that charity which is shed in our hearts by the Holy Spirit." Christ teaches by example while the Holy Spirit transmits the ability to love as a gift.

827. Warburg, "Francesco Sassetti's Last Injunction," in Renewal of Pagan Antiquity, 235.



domestic vignette leave us with the possibility that it depicts a younger Tanai and Nanna with one of their children. In this case, the message is one of familial love and care sustained throughout the life of a marriage. Another possibility, suggested by Nelson, is that the figures represent one of Tanai's sons—perhaps his oldest, Benedetto—with his wife and child. In that case, the lesson that family life and honor are sustained by *caritas* is directly extended down to the next generation for the benefit of the lineage. In either case, the Tanai de Nerli that is imaged in the altarpiece joins those models of *caritas*, Christ and Saint Martin, as example, for the benefit of his male descendants, of the affectivity that leads to sustained familial bonds and ultimate familial honor.

In this altarpiece, Filippino gave shape to an expansion and elaboration of subjective space, built upon geometric perspective and articulated into distinct zones, each with its own physical and spiritual relationship to the beholder. Space and, at times, its erasure in favor of the panel surface, are parceled up at the service of a complex vision of spiritual praxis, in which the value of Christian love, nourished within by devotion to models of perfection, is applied to the life of the lay city dweller in charge of his household. To understand Filippino's construct I have relied on fundamental Augustinian notions: John's identification of God and Love and his vision of the City of God on pilgrimage within the City of Man. While members of the Nerli family were surely involved in the composition of the altarpiece, the presence of an Augustinian sensibility compellingly suggests that the Hermits of Santo Spirito were very much involved in designing the multilayered discourse about love, human and divine, that reaches through the painting tying together its spaces in an *istoria* as coherent as it is ambitious. Indeed,

as Massari's sermon suggests, the Augustinians hoped that the *caritas* attributed to the donor's family ruled their convents and governed the social relations of the friars, between equals, but most particularly between superiors and inferiors. The dove of the Holy Spirit flying in the loggia of the Nerli altarpiece thus testifies, not only to Santo Spirito's claim to participate in the City of God, but also to the authoritative presence among them of that charity that is poured into men's hearts through the Holy Spirit.

V. Seeing God at Santo Spirito: Agnolo Del Mazziere's Holy Trinity with Saints Mary  
Magdalene and Catherine of Alexandria

The last altarpiece included in this study, The Holy Trinity between Saints Mary Magdalene and Catherine of Alexandria (fig. 130), differs from the works I have considered so far in its location, in one of the chapels owned by the Corbinelli family in the left-hand transept of Santo Spirito, and in the relative obscurity of the artist to whom it is attributed, Agnolo di Donnino del Mazziere. As I will discuss below, Agnolo belonged to the workshop of Cosimo Rosselli and worked with his older brother Domenico on the Ubertini altarpiece and the Corbinelli Madonna and Child with Saints Bartholomew, Nicholas of Bari, Bernard and Jerome. In a departure from the *sacra conversazione* model visible elsewhere at Santo Spirito, the composition of the altarpiece is centered on the divine Trinity, the subject of Augustine's De Trinitate, a work of immense prestige in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Among the four altarpieces I discuss in this dissertation, the Corbinelli Trinity may reflect most directly the intellectual guidance of the Augustinian friars.

An image that purports to portray the triune God necessarily raises formal and referential issues. To what extent is such a representation possible? If it is possible, what, in fact, is being represented, a devotional image, an ecstatic vision or the deity itself? In that context, what are we to make of Augustine's repeated assertion that the Trinity is not visible to mankind in this life? I will argue that the altarpiece's complex composition and aestheticized treatment involve both traditional and novel efforts to portray the Trinity

and give shape to substantive issues and spiritual values that are central to the De Trinitate.

### **A. The Altarpiece: Background**

Like other fifteenth-century altarpieces commissioned for Santo Spirito, the Trinity is a symmetrical composition involving two saints placed on either side of a central image. In a significant departure, the central image is a representation of the Trinity and the two saints are pictured gazing upon and praying to the Trinity, rather than merely looking out at the beholder. The underlying symmetry of the composition is reinforced by the fact that both saints are female and both are shown kneeling, their faces lifted in adoration of the central figure. To the Trinity's right, Mary Magdalene, the dedicatee of the chapel, is portrayed as a penitential hermit, thin faced and clothed in her long hair. To the Trinity's left, Catherine of Alexandria, in a gold-trimmed dress and mantle and the coronet appropriate to a princess, crosses her hands upon her chest and clasps the palm of martyrdom. As in the Nerli altarpiece, Catherine's spiked wheel, instrument of martyrdom, lies before her on the ground.

Behind both saints, the landscape rises into cliff formations set about with tall, slender trees and backed by almost identical rounded hills that protrude into the valley between them. The paired set of cliffs and hills partake of the composition's underlying symmetry, while significant variations in the terrain and the vegetation lend it some of the unpredictability and fluidity of nature. Suspended between the two saints, God the Father is seated on a cloud bank within a mandorla surrounded by a band of red-winged gilt-flecked cherubim. He holds up with his fingers the cross on which hangs the crucified Christ. The cross is planted at the center of the painting's foreground, in a bare

hillock surrounded by a flowering meadow, while the skull and bones of Adam are placed prominently in the immediate foreground.

Beyond, the meadow occupied by the cross and the two female saints drops abruptly down to a deeply recessed valley, in which we can distinguish a meandering river, a city with moat, bridge and entrance gate and, farther back, a lavender mountain range. Del Mazziere's landscape derives its sense of breadth and continuity from its one-point perspective construction (fig. 131), a construction whose brief orthogonals—the fold of the Magdalene's hair as it hits the ground and the edge of one portion of Catherine's mantle—do not distract from the landscape's effect of organic continuity. The atmospheric perspective that veils both city and mountains increases the effect of distance. The most unusual feature of the landscape, however, is the brilliant dawn light that swells up from the recessed horizon to spread through the open sky, tinting in rose the mist that envelops the city and turning to gold the winding river below.

The landscape of the Trinity bears resemblance to the background of Piero di Cosimo's Visitation in the Capponi chapel (fig. 4). In both cases, the foreground saints are backed by mid-ground settings that are symmetrical while displaying significant differences in detail. Moreover, in both paintings, the continuity between foreground and background disguises, at first reading, an abrupt drop from foreground plateau to background valley. In the Trinity altarpiece, this drop allows us to identify the elevated foreground as the mount of Golgotha on which the Crucifixion took place. In turn, the Trinity's background city may be contextualized as Jerusalem, also figured in the background of the Visitation altarpiece.<sup>828</sup> Another common detail is the isolated hilltop

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828. Like the background city of the Nerli altarpiece, discussed in the last chapter, Del Mazziere's city with its moat and towers has a northern feel. Specifically, it recalls the turreted cities that designate

monastery, visible in the background behind the figure of Saint Anthony Abbot in Piero's work, and recognizable, despite the haze of distance, behind the figure of the Magdalene in the Trinity.

Like the Capponi Visitation, the Corbinelli Trinity includes features that ground it in the culture of Santo Spirito as an Augustinian Hermit foundation and in the history of Santo Spirito as an important Florentine church. Most obviously, the central figure of the Trinity refers to Saint Augustine, purported founder and spiritual father of the Augustinian Hermits. In addition, the friars and the *opera* of the church would have been well aware of the precedent set by Maso di Banco's exquisite fourteenth-century polyptych, The Madonna and Child with Saints Mary Magdalene, Andrew, Julian and Catherine of Alexandria (fig. 7), a work saved from the fire of 1471, and according to mid-sixteenth-century documentation, already located in the Vettori chapel, above the right transept.<sup>829</sup> The link between the Trinity with its Augustinian theme, dominant gold hue and paired saints Magdalene and Catherine and the polyptych featuring the same female saints against a lavish, embossed gold backdrop, would have provided an important focal point for the convent's assertion of institutional continuity.

The predella of the Trinity altarpiece features Saint Magdalene receiving heavenly communion and Catherine standing between two spiked wheels, each narrative aligned below the figure of their respective saints in the main image. The Nativity that forms the central section of the predella places the Christ Child, adored by Mary and an angel,

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Jerusalem in the background of fifteenth-century northern Crucifixions, as in Dirk Bouts' 1450–55 Deposition Altarpiece in the Capilla Real in Grenada (Charles D. Cuttler, Northern Painting From Pucelle to Bruegel: Fourteenth, Fifteenth, and Sixteenth Centuries [Fort Worth, TX: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972], 137, fig. 163,) or the Lamentation by the Master of Saint Lucy Legend (Marina Belozerskaya, Rethinking the Renaissance: Burgundian Arts Across Europe [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002], 247, fig. 67).

829. As I noted earlier, Maso di Banco's polyptych includes representations of Augustinian saints, *supra*, n. 186.

immediately below the skull of Golgotha and the crucified Christ. The donors, both youthful in appearance, are depicted in profile at each end of the predella, the male donor included to the left of the communion of the Magdalene, the female donor to the right of Catherine's scene of martyrdom. A common mountainous landscape topped with a violet sky links the predella's varied episodes, while the saturated colors, the violet of the sky, red garments and gilt details are consonant with those of the altarpiece. As is common at Santo Spirito, the arms of the Carbonelli family, a hart rampant, appear to either side of the predella.

The overall effect of the altarpiece, including the predella, is one of a high degree of compositional coherence, delicacy, refinement and finish assisted by a sometimes lyrical use of color. In formal terms, the artist strove to balance a clear understanding of spatial perspective and a precise and sensitive rendering of human faces and forms with a decorative aesthetic that favored the picture plane. The painter clearly took extreme care both in the planning of the composition and the rendering of detail, and the result, in terms of the main altarpiece, is a stylistically unified work that binds and harmonizes its varied components, the foreground plane and the background space, a Crucifixion with attendant saints, an elaborate, composite celestial vision and a detailed naturalistic landscape.

The Corbinelli Trinity departs from the three Santo Spirito altarpieces already discussed in the beholder's mode of access. Not only is there no commonality between the panel's foreground meadow and the flooring of the church or the surface of the altar table, but the locus for the viewer's imaginary entrance into the image is blocked by the kneeling saints and the centrally placed skull. The spatial segregation imposed by the

panel's composition means that the viewer's mode of access is primarily visual. The painting, predella and frame—entirely gilded except for one horizontal section below the cornice—are thus defined as images, objects of visual attention. This function is appropriate to the altarpiece's appearance as an exquisitely rendered, lavishly gilded object. Indeed, the altar's *paliotto*, which remains in situ below the altarpiece, elaborates upon this effect (fig. 7). It is painted in a pattern of maroon pomegranates against an ornamented field of gold, with the central figure of the Magdalene pictured against a patterned gold background in a tondo set within a gold frame. In her discussion of the Magdalene chapel *paliotto*, Markowsky comments upon the quality and refinement of its execution.<sup>830</sup> It is very clear, moreover, that the prevalence of gold hues and gilt decoration in the *paliotto*, the frame and the altarpiece itself were designed to create a unified and unstintingly luxurious effect. In addition to the chapel décor's sheer beauty and seductive coloring, its presentation as a precious commodity, affirms its role as the focus of visual desire. This role, in turn, accommodates the motif of feminine beauty, suggested by the presence of the Magdalene and of Catherine of Alexandria. It is also relevant to the deeply interlinked themes of longing and visual gratification that are very much a part of the altarpiece's treatment of the Trinity.

The work's emphatically visual character is also appropriate to the preoccupation with vision evidenced in the panel's presentation of its subject matter: Saint Magdalene and Saint Catherine, their bodies lifted in prayer, keep their eyes riveted on the image of the deity. The insistent symmetry of the composition reinforces the visibility of its central elements, the large sharply lit skull and bones at the very foreground of the image, the body of Christ and, above, the figure of God the Father whose sorrowful gaze is

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830. Markowsky, "Eine Gruppe bemalter Paliotti," 124.



clearly directed at the beholder. At the same time, the skull of Adam and the body of Christ are depicted with a naturalistic precision that reinforces visibility with tactile presence. In fact, the upper body of the crucified Christ, the muscles of his left arm and pectoral sharply delineated by shadow, is inclined forward, so that it might conceivably be seen as emerging from the picture frame toward the contemplating viewer. Thus, within a contextual definition of the altarpiece as a desirable object of visual attention, the altarpiece singles out its foreground elements, the skull, the body of Christ, as objects of immediate presence and heightened impact that forge a particularly intense relationship with the viewer.

### 1. The Commission

The Trinity chapel is one of four adjoining Santo Spirito chapels owned by three different branches of the Corbinelli *consorteria*, all situated on the western wall of the church's left transept. The Corbinelli, like the Capponi, were a large, wealthy and well-connected Oltrarno clan with long-standing ties to the religious community of Santo Spirito.<sup>831</sup> Several generations of Corbinelli from different branches served on the Santo Spirito *opera*.<sup>832</sup> The humanist Angelo di Tommaso di Bartolomeo Corbinelli (1373–

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831. Mohlo includes the Corbinelli among the 110 lineages that constitute, on the basis of specific economic and political criteria, the “inner core” of Florence's quattrocento elite (*Marriage Alliance*, 385). Involved in the wool trade, banking and landowning, they counted among the richest families in the Santo Spirito *quartiere* in the early fifteenth century; Lauro Martines, *The Social World of the Florentine Humanists* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963), 318–20. A Bartolommeo Corbinelli is included, along with Neri di Gino Capponi, among the concerned citizens responsive to Fra Francesco Zoppo's calls for the rebuilding of Santo Spirito in the late 1420s, according to the report of the Anonimo Magliabecchiano; Botto, “L'edificazione,” 481.

832. Corbinelli *operai* at Santo Spirito include Giovanni di Tommaso Corbinelli, from 1436, and Ruggero Corbinelli in 1488 and from 1491 to 1493, followed by his son Bernardo. Lisner, “Andrea Sansovino,” 211–12.

1419) made substantial bequests to the convent<sup>833</sup> as well as specific bequests to one of its masters of theology, Agostino di Roma.<sup>834</sup>

The earliest chapel purchased in the choir of the new church of Santo Spirito, the northernmost chapel in the left transept, was acquired by Tommaso di Piero di Agnolo Corbinelli. As we noted earlier, the altarpiece commissioned for that chapel, Cosimo Rosselli's Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints Thomas and Peter (originally Augustine -- fig. 13), dated 1482, with its two saints and twin angels to either side of the Virgin and Child, functioned as a compositional model for succeeding altarpieces in the left transept of the church.<sup>835</sup> The son of Tommaso, Bartolomeo di Tommaso di Piero Corbinelli, acquired the southernmost chapel on the left transept wall.<sup>836</sup> He furnished it with The Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints Bartholomew, Nicholas of Bari, Bernard and Jerome (fig. 9), a panel that reproduces Rosselli's composition, albeit in a richer and more fluid idiom. Bartolomeo's altarpiece deviates from its predecessor in including Saints Bernard and Jerome, portrayed in the foreground *en abîme*. The four

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833. Angelo's brother Antonio, also a noted humanist, gave his collection of manuscripts to the Florentine Badia with the provision that, if the Badia departed from the Benedictine rule, they be transferred to Santo Spirito. Mohlo, "Angelo Corbinelli" and "Antonio Corbinelli," in Dizionario Biografico Degli Italiani, vol. 28 (Rome: Istituto della Encyclopedia Italiana, 1980), 744–47.

834. Ibid., 745. Agostino di Roma is, in all likelihood, Agostino Favaroni, born in Rome in 1360 and, by 1405, superior of the Roman province of the Augustinian Hermits, which included the convent of Santo Spirito. He is listed among the professors of theology at the faculty of the Florentine studium in 1416. Favaroni became prior general of the order in 1425 and again in 1430. He was an early supporter of the observance, a prolific writer of scholastic treatises and ardent spiritual commentaries on the scriptures, and a theologian for whom, in particular, Saint Augustine was an important intellectual touchstone.

835. Supra, chap. 1, 37–39 and accompanying notes.

836. Arrighi, c. 34, cited in Capretti, "La pinacoteca sacra," 243 and n. 26.

saints represented in the altarpiece very likely refer to relatives of Bartolomeo, his brother Bernardo di Tommaso and his brother's sons Niccolo and Girolamo.<sup>837</sup>

The classicizing marble decor of the Corbinelli Communion chapel (fig. 21), begun by Sansovino in 1490 and completed in 1494, reflects the 1421 testamentary bequest of Matteo di Jacopo Corbinelli, a member of a different branch of the family. Matteo's testament specified that the altar was to be consecrated to Saint Matthew, one of the original dedicatees of the Augustinian convent, and was to house "corpus domini nostri Jesus Christi."<sup>838</sup> The testator also requested that, if his chapel in the old church was destroyed, it be rebuilt in the new; for that purpose he provided a sum of one thousand florins.<sup>839</sup> The 1430 Castato declaration of Matteo Corbinelli confirms that he did in fact erect an altar dedicated to Saint Matthew in the old church.<sup>840</sup> In 1485, after the new church was completed, the convent formally entrusted to the Corbinelli the custody of that church's Communion altar, whose decoration includes a niche statue of Saint Matthew.<sup>841</sup>

The history of Matteo Corbinelli's request is relevant, not only to Santo Spirito's Communion altar, but also to the adjoining chapel of the Magdalene. In his 1421 testament, Matteo had specifically mentioned, in addition to a chapel, an "image Beate

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837. Capretti, "La pinacoteca sacra," 243–44.

838. ASF, CRS, 122, 75, Libro di Contratti e Testamenti, fol. 77 v.; Agostini, vol. 2, 668ff, cited by Lisner, "Andrea Sansovino," 207 and n. 5.

839. Lisner, "Andrea Sansovino," 207.

840. Ibid., 207 n. 5, citing Agostini, vol. 2, 598.

841. George Haydn Huntley, Andrea Sansovino, Sculptor and Architect of the Italian Renaissance (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1935), Doc. I, 113ff, cited in Lisner, 207.

Marie Magdalene.”<sup>842</sup> That image may, in fact, have been realized by Brunelleschi, who, according to Manetti, produced for Santo Spirito a wooden statue of the repentant Magdalene, later destroyed in the convent fire.<sup>843</sup> In addition, Arrighi, in his 1692 liturgical Memorie, ascribes two chapels in the old Santo Spirito to Matteo Corbinelli, one dedicated to Saint Matthew, the other to the Magdalene.<sup>844</sup> Capretti concludes that both the Communion chapel and the chapel of the Magdalene were the gifts of Matteo, as contemplated by his 1421 testament.<sup>845</sup> These gifts were apparently implemented by the signatory of the Corbinelli contract with Sansovino, Ruggero Corbinelli, a trusted ally of Lorenzo de’ Medici and longtime *operaio* of Santo Spirito.<sup>846</sup> Following Ruggero’s death in 1493, his son Bernardo joined the *opera* and, presumably, took over his family’s responsibilities at Santo Spirito, specifically the decoration of the two chapels funded by Matteo’s testament.<sup>847</sup> Further evidence of the common patronage of the Communion and Magdalene chapels is the small initial *m*, its outer legs curving inward, placed above the hart rampant in the Corbinelli shield, both in Sansovino’s altar (fig. 132) and in the predella and the *paliotto* of the Trinity altarpiece (fig. 133).<sup>848</sup> The *m* initial clearly

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842. ASF, CRS, 122, 76, Libro di Contratti e Testamenti, fol. 77v, cited in Capretti, “La pinacoteca sacra,” 244 n. 30; Lisner, “Andrea Sansovino,” 207, citing Agostini, vol. 2, 668ff.

843. Capretti supposes that Brunelleschi’s wooden statue of the repentant Magdalene was placed in that chapel (“La pinacoteca sacra,” 244); Battisti, Filippo Brunelleschi, 45, 343.

844. A. Arrighi, Memorie delle obblighi di messe et officii del Convento di Santo Spirito, Biblioteca del Convento di Santo Spirito a Firenze (B.C.S.S.F.) ms. 1692, c. 10 nn. 19, 20, cited in Capretti, “La pinacoteca sacra,” 244 n. 30.

845. Capretti, “La pinacoteca sacra,” 244.

846. Supra, n. 5.

847. Lisner, “Andrea Sansovino,” 212 and n. 17.

848. Ibid., 209; Capretti, “La pinacoteca sacra,” 244. Sansovino also placed a larger *m*, its inward-curving legs shaped into a circle or sphere, at the center of the chapel’s carved frieze. Lisner, “Andrea Sansovino,” fig. 39.

served to distinguish the patronage of Matteo di Jacopo's branch of the Corbinelli clan from that of other branches.

Lisner, however, proposed that the Magdalene chapel was the gift of Maddalena Corbinelli, the daughter of Bernardo di Tommaso, married to Antonio Gondi in 1464 and widowed in 1486. The young couple who kneel to the right and left in the Trinity altarpiece predella would refer to Maddalena and Antonio Gondi. She found evidence for such a commission in the right flanking position of Saint Magdalene in the Trinity altarpiece, a place ordinarily reserved for the namesake of the chapel's patron. Since the altarpiece nowhere refers to the death of Gondi, Lisner concluded that the date of Gondi's death, 1486, represented a *terminus ante quem* for the Magdalene chapel decoration.<sup>849</sup>

As we have seen in the case of the Saint Martin chapel at Santo Spirito, the chapel dedicatee was not necessarily the namesake of the donor. Capretti suggests instead that Matteo may have dedicated a chapel to the Magdalene because the family was particularly devoted to her cult.<sup>850</sup> Such devotion is certainly apparent in Matteo's explicit concern that his chapel—or one of his two chapels, if Arrighi's statement is correct—contain an image of Saint Magdalene. Finally, the correspondence between the identically shaped initial *m*'s on the Corbinelli shield in the two adjoining chapels strongly suggests a wish to display the common patronage of the two chapels and to

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849. Lisner, "Andrea Sansovino," 212 n. 19. Lisner argued, moreover, that the gilt flecks that decorate Saint Catherine's sleeves in the Trinity panel resemble the flames in the Gondi coat of arms and thus allude to Magdalena's marriage to Antonio Gondi.

850. A Maddalena Corbinelli entered the convent of Le Murate in 1494.

distinguish that patronage from that of the two other two Corbinelli chapels in the left transept.<sup>851</sup>

The Trinity altarpiece's patronage is clearly relevant to the issue of its date. If, as Capretti argues, the Magdalene chapel and the Communion chapel, whose decoration was completed by 1494, share the same original patron, Matteo Corbinelli, and if both derive from Matteo's preexisting chapels in the old church, the decoration of the Magdalene chapel is also likely to have been completed in the 1490s. In fact, it is probable that Matteo's descendants would have attended to the decoration of the Magdalene chapel after the 1494 completion of the Communion chapel, whose liturgical function made its construction more urgent. Accordingly, while Lisner advocated a *terminus post quem* of 1486 for the Trinity altarpiece, Capretti has placed it at "the end of the fifteenth century."<sup>852</sup>

## 2. The Painter

In a 1905 article, Herbert Horne attributed the Magdalene chapel altarpiece to the Florentine artist Giovanni di Michele da Larciano, known as Il Graffione.<sup>853</sup> In 1962, however, Federico Zeri included all three Corbinelli altarpieces and the Ubertini altarpiece among a group of works he attributed to an anonymous Master of Santo

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851. The shape of the curled *m* that decorates both the Communion and the Magdalene chapels is sufficiently distinctive that the difference in size, signaled by Lisner, between the large *M* in the Communion chapel and the smaller *m* in the predella of the Trinity altarpiece does not appear meaningful. While Capretti's interpretation of the patronage evidence is more convincing than that of Lisner, it leaves unclear the identity of the couple displayed in the Trinity altarpiece predella. They probably portray Bernardo di Ruggero Corbinelli and his wife.

852. Capretti, Building Complex, 43.

853. Herbert Horne, "Il Graffione," The Burlington Magazine, 8 (1905): 189–96; C. Gamba, "Il Graffione," L'Arte, 41, 22 (1957): 111. The attribution was followed by Carla Fredericke Heussler, Die Trinität von Sandro Botticelli in den Londoner Courtauld Institute Gallery: Eine Einordnung in das Gesamtwerk (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1997), 56.

Spirito.<sup>854</sup> Everett Fahy, writing in 1976, enlarged and summarized the Master of Santo Spirito's list of attributions; Fahy differed from Zeri in tentatively accepting the identification of the Master with Il Graffione.<sup>855</sup> However, in a 1988 article, Anna Padoa Rizzo brought the Master of Santo Spirito's oeuvre in relation to the brothers Donnino and Agnolo di Domenico del Mazziere, sons of lifelong resident of the Santo Spirito *quartiere*.<sup>856</sup> Agnolo, the younger of the two brothers (1466–1513), registered in the guild of Saint Luke in 1503.<sup>857</sup> He is mentioned several times by Vasari, as the source of the frontispiece heads for his lives of Cosimo Rosselli and of the sculptor Benedetto da Rovezzano, as a close friend of Rosselli, as a passionate and prolific draughtsman and as an early collaborator of Michelangelo at the Sistine Chapel.<sup>858</sup> Vasari specifically mentions frescoes by his hand in the Hospital of Bonifazio in Florence, in particular a

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854. Federico Zeri, "Eccentrici fiorentini," *Bolletino d'Arte*, 47 (1962): 218, 231–36 n. 2. Christian Von Holst had earlier persuasively connected a drawing entitled *Testa di giovane* in Berlin (Kupferstichkabinett, n. 5041) with the heads of two angels in an anonymous enthroned *Madonna with Saints* in the Pinacoteca of Volterra (Anna Padoa Rizzo, "Agnolo di Donnino: Nuovi documenti, le fonti e la possibile identificazione con il 'Maestro di Santo Spirito,'" *Rivista d'arte* 40 [1988]: fig. 9). The composition of the Volterra altarpiece, with its two angels to either side of the Madonna and its two standing saints, as well as saints' volumetric figures and specific physiognomies, clearly recalls the composition and figures of the two Corbinelli and the Ubertini *sacre conversazione* in Santo Spirito. Von Holst, *Francesco Grannaci* (Monaco: Bruckmann, 1974), 188, 213. Zeri described the master's works as "based upon a rich and varied inheritance, reflecting the major artists working in Florence at the end of the Quattrocento—from Filippino Lippi and Domenico Ghirlandaio to Perugino and perhaps, Botticelli. The main influence is, however, Lorenzo di Credi, with whom this painter must have been in contact." Federico Zeri, *Italian Paintings in the Walters Art Gallery* (Baltimore: Meriden Gravure Conn., 1976), 1:108 n. 71, 198.

855. Everett Fahy, *Some Followers of Ghirlandaio* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1976), 192–95.

856. Padoa Rizzo, "Agnolo di Donnino," 127.

857. Filippo Baldinucci, *Notizie de' Professori del disegno da Cimabue in qua, 1681–1728*, ed. Ranalli, 1845 (Florence: SPES, 1975) I, 542, 543; Dominic Ellis Colnaghi, *A Dictionary of Florentine Painters* (London: Brinton, 1928), 180, both cited in Padoa Rizzo, "Agnolo di Donnino," 125.

858. Vasari, *Lives of the Painters*, 2:499, 666, 795. Agnolo is praised as a painter of frescoes in a 1508 letter by Grannaci to Michelangelo. Von Holst, 213, doc. 19, cited in Padoa Rizzo, "Agnolo di Donnino," 126.

Trinity upon the corbel of a vault, as well as “certain beggars ... with the Director receiving them, all very well wrought.”<sup>859</sup>

Padoa Rizzo’s study of documentation relating to the Hospital of Bonifazio reveals that Agnolo painted the frescoes described by Vasari under the general supervision of Bernardo di Stefano Rosselli, Cosimo’s cousin. The evidence would appear to confirm at least a professional relationship between the Mazziere brothers and the Rosselli family workshop. Padoa Rizzo was also able to find relationships in physiological types, modeling and use of shading between signed drawings of Agnolo di Donnino and heads in works given to the Master of Santo Spirito, among them figures in the Corbinelli Saint Bartholomew and Ubertini altarpieces.<sup>860</sup> In a later article, Padoa Rizzo confirmed her findings by linking a painting attributed to the Master of Santo Spirito, The Madonna and Child with Two Angels and Saints Lucy and Peter Martyr, now in the Accademia in Venice, to documented work of the brothers in the chapel of the Ospedale di Santa Lucia in Florence.<sup>861</sup> At this time, the identification of the Master of Santo Spirito with the brothers Donnino and Agnolo del Mazziere has gained acceptance,<sup>862</sup> most relevantly by Capretti in her discussion of the Corbinelli and Ubertini

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859. Vasari, Lives of the Painters, 2:499.

860. Padoa Rizzo, “Agnolo di Donnino,” 138.

861. Padoa Rizzo, “Indagini sulle botteghe di pittura del ‘400 in Toscana. Il Maestro di Santo Spirito e I Del Mazziere: una conferma,” Erba d’Arno, 46 (1991), 58. “Biographical entry on Agnolo and Donnino del Mazziere,” in Maestri e botteghe: Pittura a Firenze alla fine del Quattrocento, exhibition catalogue, Mina Gregori, ed. (Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 1992), 114, 123, 218.

862. Catherine Monbeig Goguel, “A propos des dessins du ‘Maitre de la Femme Voilée assise du Louvre:’ Reflexion Methodologique en faveur du ‘Maitre de Santo Spirito’ (Agnolo et ou Donnino di Domenico del Mazziere?)” in Florentine Drawings at the Time of Lorenzo the Magnificent, a Villa Spelman Colloquia, 4 (Bologna: Nuova Alfa Editoriale, 1994), 111–29. Fahy has now accepted the identification of the Master of Santo Spirito with the Del Mazziere brothers. Reviewing an exhibition that included two works given to Agnolo, he notes: “The noble master of S. Spirito emerges after decades of debate as the figure whom Vasari called Agnolo di Donnino... and his older and apparently less gifted



altarpieces at Santo Spirito.<sup>863</sup> Moreover, a number of works attributed to the brothers include deeply recessed landscape vistas, reminiscent of the Trinity altarpiece setting, notably the Adoration from the church of San Francesco in Florence, which Padoa Rizzo gives squarely to Agnolo (fig. 140). The San Francesco altarpiece landscape includes the softened outline of distant mountains, a rocky escarpment and a mid-ground scattered profusely with trees and bushes that resemble those of the Trinity altarpiece. The foreground meadow of the Adoration, like that of the Trinity, is strewn with delicately described plants and flowers.<sup>864</sup>

The attribution of the Trinity altarpiece to a hypothetical Del Mazziere workshop raises the issue of the relative contribution of the two brothers to the altarpiece.

Grannaci, in his recommendation to Michelangelo, and Vasari, in his multiple references, extol the skill of Agnolo, but make no mention of his older brother, Donnino.<sup>865</sup> Padoa Rizzo's discussion of Agnolo and Donnino's fresco work in the ex-church of Santa Chiara in Pistoia is relevant here. We have records dated 1499 of payments for work accomplished to Donnino di Domenico; of that work, four portraits of saints in the

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brother Donnino." Fahy, review of "Late Fifteenth-Century Florentine Painting, Florence, Palazzo Strozzi," The Burlington Magazine 135 (1993): 169–71.

863. Capretti, "La pinacoteca sacra," 243–46; Capretti, Building Complex, 22, 42–43.

864. The tabernacle is located on the Via Martellini; Padoa Rizzo, "Agnolo di Donnino," 158, fig. 26. Another work with a comparable landscape associated with the Del Mazziere is a Madonna in Glory with Two Saints from the church of Saints Michael and Lorenzo in Montevettolini. The central figures of the Virgin and Child, at least, have been attributed to Agnolo by Padoa Rizzo ("Agnolo di Donnino," 161, fig. 29). The panel displays its saints on a foreground meadow, which, as in the Trinity altarpiece, drops abruptly down to a landscape of trees and towers and misty mountains stretching into the distance. In addition, a tabernacle fresco of the Pietà in San Felice a Ema, given to Agnolo by Padoa Rizzo, includes a deep landscape background striking, according to Rizzo, for its "luminosa chiarezza," a quality that certainly applies to the Trinity altarpiece.

865. See also Baldinucci, I, 542–43, cited in Padoa Rizzo, "Agnolo di Donnino," 125.

pendentives of the dome have survived.<sup>866</sup> Padoa Rizzo argues that the Saints Bonaventure (fig. 134), Clare (fig. 135) and Francesco share a rigidity, rudimentary modeling and lack of refinement in their gestures that is akin to that of the figures in the Corbinelli Saint Bartholomew altarpiece. The figure of Saint Anthony (fig. 137), however, is far more volumetric; the head, in particular, is sensitively modeled.<sup>867</sup> From this, as well as from the relative oblivion into which posterity consigned the older Donnino, Rizzo tentatively concludes that any unevenness in quality in the Del Mazzieres' work is due to the collaboration of the two brothers, one of whom was more talented and open to innovation than the other.<sup>868</sup> In a subsequent article, Barbara Deimling drew parallels between Saint Clare in Pistoia (fig. 135) and the figures of the Virgin and Saint Veridiana in an early sixteenth-century Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints John the Baptist and Veridiana (fig. 136) in the National Gallery in Edinburgh. She argued that the similarities between these figures --including simplicity of contour, plainness of drapery and flattened physiognomies with round, rigid eyes-- most likely define the work of Donnino di Domenico.<sup>869</sup>

Capretti, who has accepted Padoa Rizzo's suggestion as to the allocation of responsibilities between the brothers, hypothesizes that both Donnino and Agnolo assisted Cosimo Rosselli with his 1482 Santo Spirito altarpiece for Tommaso Corbinelli.

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866. Padoa Rizzo, "Agnolo di Donnino," 147.

867. Among others, an Adoration of the Child from the Church of San Francesco in Florence and a panel fragment representing Saints Leonard and Julian, now at the Musée du Petit Palais in Avignon. Padoa Rizzo, "Agnolo di Donnino," 150, fig. 18; 151, fig. 19.

868. Padoa Rizzo, "Agnolo di Donnino," 157.

869. Barbara Deimling, "Provenienz und Auftraggeber eines Gemaldes von der hand des Meisters von Santo Spirito," Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz, 36 (1992): 397–400. Deimling points as well to a portrait of a young man, given to the Master of Santo Spirito and now in the National Gallery in Washington, as typical of Donnino di Domenico's style.

Following Padoa Rizzo, she suggests that the later Corbinelli and Ubertini altarpieces involved a collaboration between the brothers in which Agnolo gradually assumed a predominant role.<sup>870</sup> On the subject of the Santo Spirito Trinity, Padoa Rizzo speaks only of the head of Christ, which she attributes to Agnolo.<sup>871</sup> Capretti, in turn, does not explicitly give the panel to Agnolo, but notes its “high quality with respect to others painted by the group,” and “a notable modernization bringing it into line with the latest developments in contemporary Florentine painting.”<sup>872</sup>

Taking as reference points the frescoes attributed to Donnino at Santa Chiara in Pistoia (figs. 137 and 138), it seems clear that none of the figures displayed in the Trinity panel show the stiffness of posture and simplicity of form associated with the figures of Saints Bonaventura and Chiara. The Saint Catherine is fully described in the round, an effect emphasized by the voluminous crimson mantle that swells at her hips and molds one leg and thigh, with a touch of Michelangelo’s massive grandeur. Both female saints are positioned in demanding poses that allow us a clear view of their profile while conveying that they are spectators of the central image. Neither of their heads conforms to the model given to Donnino’s heads by Deimling; on the contrary, they clearly represent different types, the long-faced, hollow-eyed Magdalene contrasting with a blooming, full-cheeked Catherine. Most telling, however, are the Trinity figures: the head of God the Father has a naturalistic specificity and sensitivity to the interplay of expression, skin and features in an aging face. The head and body of Christ are not only carefully modeled and delicately shaded, they also have a freshness and immediacy

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870. Capretti, “La pinacoteca sacra,” 243; Padoa Rizzo, “Agnolo di Donnino,” 144–45.

871. Padoa Rizzo, “Agnolo di Donnino,” 157.

872. Capretti, Building Complex, 43.

which speaks of an unhesitating transition from the draughtsman's paper to the panel. The delicate and varied faces of the cherubim also testify to a talent for portraiture. All this clearly corresponds to what we know of Agnolo di Domenico's passion for drawing, as described by Vasari, and his ability in that area as indicated by the few signed drawings that have come down to us.

Among the works that Padoa Rizzo and Fahy assigned specifically to Agnolo are three recovered fragments from a Madonna and Child Enthroned with Saints Leonard, James, Bartholomew and Julian, a work that must have been striking for the highly individualized and varied physiognomies of its male saints. The fragment now at the Musée du Petit Palais in Avignon (fig. 138) displays a Saint Leonard with the rounded head of the Saint Anthony in Pistoia (fig. 137), a figure given to Agnolo by Padoa Rizzo. The triangular head of Saint James with its prominent cheekbones, wide curvaceous mouth and curled tendrils of hair very much resembles that of the Trinity altarpiece Christ (fig. 139). At the same time, differences in physiognomy in Agnolo's *sacra conversazione* are linked to differences in temperament; the almost tangible ardor of Saint Leonard contrasts, for instance, with the serene exaltation of Saint James. These nuanced expressions of spiritualized affect appear as well in the Magdalene and Catherine of the Trinity altarpiece, where the Magdalene's lyrical fervor is juxtaposed with Catherine's intense, but more reticent, concentration.

If the younger del Mazziere, Agnolo, executed the Trinity altarpiece figures, there is good reason to believe that he was responsible for the entire painting. Indeed, one of the more striking features of the work is its overall consistency, particularly in the treatment of detail. In terms of scale, rhythm, delicacy of line and ornamental texture, the

shimmering wavelets of the Magdalene's long hair echo the delicate leaves on the middle-ground trees, the gilt speckles of Catherine's sleeve, the scattered white petals of the foreground flowers, the dense tracery of folds in Christ's loincloth and the gleaming outline of the cherubim's feathers. The gradual transitions in hue between the brightly lit background and the darker violet sky at the summit of the panel are handled with a similar use of small-scale detail and precision of touch. The delicate and carefully constructed landscapes of the predella reveal the same inclination toward decorative refinement. This consistent approach to detail, which confers on the panel a rhythmic unity in keeping with its one-point perspective and the clarity of its symmetrical composition, strongly suggests that one artist, the younger del Mazziere, was responsible for its execution.

### 3. The Date

As we discussed above, Capretti located the Trinity altarpiece within a very general time frame "at the end of the fifteenth century,"<sup>873</sup> while Lisner gave it a *terminus ante quem* of 1486. As we saw, Lisner's dating was based on certain assumptions about the patronage of the altarpiece.<sup>874</sup> She claimed additional support for her position from the strong resemblance between the frame of the Trinity altarpiece and that of Rosselli's 1482 Madonna and Child with Saints Thomas and Augustine (fig. 13).<sup>875</sup> However, the likelihood that Agnolo del Mazziere is the sole author of the painting argues for the later

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873. Capretti (Building Complex, 43) alludes to the differences between the Trinity and the two Saint Bartholomew altarpieces in terms of a "modernization" of the Del Mazziere style. She appears to be agnostic as to whether this evolution is due to the Trinity's later date or to the fact that Agnolo alone was responsible for its execution.

874. *Supra*, 346.

875. Lisner, "Andrea Sansovino," 212 n. 19.

date advocated by Capretti. The *castato* records of Domenico del Mazziere indicate that Agnolo was born in 1466 and that he joined the guild of Saint Luke in 1503.<sup>876</sup> Lisner's *terminus ante quem* date of 1486 would thus give sole authorship of an altarpiece, commissioned by one of Santo Spirito's most prominent patron families, located in one of its most prominent chapels, and executed, as we have seen, with considerable sophistication and control, to an artist who was younger than twenty years of age. In addition, most of the documented works of the Del Mazziere are associated with dates in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. The brothers received a commission for the decoration of the chapel of the Ospedale di Santa Lucia in Florence in 1490. They undertook their fresco decoration of the church of Santa Chiara in Pistoia in 1499, while Agnolo participated in the execution of frescoes the Ospedale di Santo Bonifacio, under the supervision of Bernardo di Stefano Rosselli in 1508–9.<sup>877</sup>

A date in the late 1490s for the Trinity altarpiece is also appropriate to the artist's landscape treatment, which melds an accurate one-point perspective construction with unobtrusive orthogonals and a confident use of atmospheric perspective. Certain decorative features of the predella are even more telling (fig. 133): The two pairs of plump putti that prop up the Corbinelli arms stand in exaggerated contraposto, arms gently raised and heads twisting back with a sinuous *grazia* that points directly to the sixteenth century. They are, in fact, the diminutive cousins of the putti in Raffaellino del Garbo's neighboring Segni altarpiece, dated 1505 (fig. 20), or of the two singing putti in the foreground of Raphael's 1508 Madonna del Baldacchino, commissioned for the Dei

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876. Paddoa Rizzo, "Agnolo di Donnino," 126.

877. Ibid, 127.

chapel in the Santo Spirito nave (fig. 141). Moreover, the different sections of the predella are separated by three-dimensional gilt pedestals, reminiscent of the decorations of the Domus Aurea in Rome, and very different from the plain bands that segment the 1482 predella of the original Rosselli altarpiece. The very same gilt pedestals subdivide the predella of Raffaellino del Garbo's richly framed Madonna and Child with Saints at Santa Maria degli Angeli in Siena (fig. 142). That altarpiece and its frame by Antonio Barili are securely dated to 1502.

It may be objected that Agnolo's style here has a *retardataire* descriptive character and tendency to small-scale ornament. However, the decorative nature of Agnolo's style is in fact entirely appropriate to the last years of the fifteenth century and the first years of the sixteenth. Hellmut Wohl has described the emergence at the dawn of the sixteenth century of an "ornate classical style" characterized by "refinement and finish"<sup>878</sup> and a "rich decorative structure," with "small and compact figures in rippling or highly decorated garments surrounded by sparkling architectural or ornamental detail... Figures are pressed into the plane... Patterns and schemes determine the whole."<sup>879</sup> The style is exemplified by Pinturicchio's 1492–95 Disputation of Saint Catherine in the Sala dei Santi in the Vatican (fig. 143) and his 1502–8 frescoes for the Piccolimini Library in the Siena cathedral.<sup>880</sup>

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878. Hellmut Wohl, The Aesthetics of Italian Renaissance Art: A Reconsideration of Style (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 120.

879. Konrad Oberhuber, "Rome and the Art of the Courts in Northern Europe in the Sixteenth Century: Some Reflections," in Il se rendit en Italie: Etudes offertes a Andre Chastel (Paris: Flammarion, 1987), 72, cited in Wohl, Aesthetics of Italian Renaissance Art, 115.

880. Wohl, Aesthetics of Italian Renaissance Art, 115, 122; Patricia Fortini Brown, Venetian Narrative Painting in the Age of Carpaccio (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), 99.

Moreover, we noted above similarities between the Trinity and Piero di Cosimo's Visitation. Both works follow a similar landscape schema of an elevated foreground, on which the principal figures are situated, and an abrupt drop down to a vast, deeply recessed valley background. In addition, the left and right cliff formations in the Trinity landscape resemble the overhanging cliff in the Visitation. The pathways up the cliff sides in the Trinity appear smoothly scooped into rounded shapes as if by giant trowels, an effect that is characteristic of the rocks, paths and desert of Piero's landscape (fig. 4), but does not appear to occur in other Del Mazziere landscapes (fig. 140). As I have argued above, it is quite possible that the Visitation dates from after 1497. It thus seems probable that 1496 should serve as a *terminus ante quem* for the Trinity panel, as well.

Yet, if we locate the Trinity altarpiece in the late 1490s, or maybe even in the first years of the new century, what are we to make of its frame? The frame consists of fluted gilt pilasters with Corinthian capitals and, above, a row of dentils surmounted by a painted dark blue palmetto frieze and a cornice. The inner frame is decorated with different gilt motifs along its horizontal and vertical sections. Aside from that inner surround, the frame is virtually identical with that of Rosselli's 1482 Madonna and Child with Saints Thomas and Augustine (fig. 13).<sup>881</sup> As we noted in chapter 1, this type of frame appears to have been ubiquitous in Florence in the mid-quattrocento; by the late fifteenth century, however, it has been replaced by a more elaborate design involving a heavier cornice and paneled pilasters decorated with painted or carved candelabra.<sup>882</sup> At Santo Spirito, the 1488 Ubertini altarpiece and its twin, the Corbinelli Madonna and

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881. Another identical frame is that now given to Botticini's Santa Monica and Sisters of the Augustinian Order.

882. Supra, chap. 1, pp. 33, 42; Renato Baldi, Giovan Gualberto Lisini, Carlo Martelli and Stefania Martelli La Cornice Fiorentina e Senese: storia e tecniche di restauro (Florence: Alinea, 1992), 16.



Child with Saints Bartholomew, Nicholas, Bernard and Jerome (fig. 9) display paneled pilasters decorated with vegetation candelabra. In addition, in keeping with the quattrocento evolution in altarpiece design, these same altarpieces have limited the images in their predellas to a centrally placed image of the Man of Sorrows. The Trinity, like the Rosselli altarpiece, retains its extensive historiated predella.

However, the ornaments introduced by Agnolo into his predella—the posturing putti and the pedestal dividers—strongly suggest that that predella is a late quattrocento or early cinquecento rendition of an earlier design.<sup>883</sup> The most likely explanation for the disjunction between the probable date of the altarpiece and the style of its frame and predella is that Ruggero Corbinelli, or his son, Bernardo, specifically requested an “old-fashioned” frame. Such a frame would have significant associations for the entire Corbinelli *consorteria*, whose patronage of Santo Spirito occupied the entire western wall of the west transept. The Trinity altarpiece frame would create a visible linkage between that altarpiece and the 1482 Madonna and Child with Saints Bartholomew and Augustine, the original Corbinelli commission for the new Santo Spirito, and, by extension, with the history of that clan’s patronage of the church.

In addition, because the chapel of Saint Bartholomew and that of the Magdalene were located to either side of the Communion chapel (fig. 144), the similarity of their décor would create a pleasing effect of symmetry, which would heighten the visual

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883. A similar argument may be made about the Magdalene chapel *paliotto* (fig. 4), attributed by Capretti to Agnolo’s brother Donnino (“La pinacoteca sacra,” 246). With its pomegranate brocade pattern, “hanging” panels decorated with the Corbinelli arms and titular saint placed within a centrally located tondo, the altar-frontal resembles the *paliotti* in the Saint Thomas and Bartholomew chapels. However, the decoratively restrained gold frame of the Magdalene tondo creates a distinct effect of refinement and elegance. Moreover, the *paliotto* Magdalene --far more volumetric than the nearby *paliotti* figures of Saints Thomas and Bartholomew-- reaches out beyond the edge of the circular frame. This slight gesture transforms the tondo into an open window inhabited by a live figure in an unobtrusive but playfully sophisticated reinterpretation of a traditional form.

impact of the Communion chapel with its sculpted décor (fig. 21)—a distinctive feature in the church at that time—and speak eloquently of the Corbinelli patronage traditions at Santo Spirito. Indeed, while the Corbinellis’ persistent use of artists from the Rosselli workshop—Rosselli himself, and, after his death, his assistants, the Del Mazziere—has been attributed to aesthetic conservatism,<sup>884</sup> it may have functioned primarily as a visual expression of familial continuity. The same may be said of the clan’s repeated use of the Rosselli composition, the *conversazione* with two saints and two angels. “Old-fashioned” compositions in “old-fashioned” frames may have served as visual markers of the Corbinelli presence, a more extensive and elaborate rendition of the family coat of arms.

The Trinity altarpiece itself departs from the model of a *sacra conversazione* surrounding the Virgin and Child. The intimate association between the divine Trinity and Saint Augustine makes it very likely that the friars themselves, rather than the lay patrons, selected that particular subject matter. Certainly, the hermits would have had an interest in placing an Augustinian imprint on a chapel so prominently located next to the church’s Communion chapel. They would have also have encouraged a decorative scheme whereby two altarpieces, which, at that time, referred explicitly to Saint Augustine, the Madonna and Child with Saints Bartholomew and Augustine (now Saint Peter) and The Trinity with Saints Magdalene and Catherine served as pendants, which framed the Communion chapel within the spiritual life and the theology of Augustine (fig. 144).

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884. Capretti, “La pinacoteca sacra,” 243.

## B. The Saints in Contemplation

### 1. Saint Mary Magdalene

Agnolo del Mazziere's Trinity places the figure of the Magdalene, the chapel's dedicatee, to the Trinity's right as its principal devotee and witness. This widely venerated saint was composed of several different women featured in scripture,<sup>885</sup> among them Mary of Magdala, present at the Crucifixion and the first person to see the risen Christ and to inform the disciples of his resurrection. The penitential Magdalene of the Trinity altarpiece owes more, however, to the unidentified sinner who appeared at the house of Simon Pharisee to bathe Christ's feet with her repentant tears, wipe them with her hair and anoint them with oil. Christ forgave her sins, telling his host, "Many sins are forgiven her, because she hath loved much" (Luke 7:47-48). A third figure identified with the Magdalene was Mary, sister of Martha, who sat at the feet of Christ listening to his "word" while Martha was busy serving. "Mary," Christ tells Martha, "hath chosen the better part" (Luke 10:39-42).

The effect of this composite history was to create a female figure who was an intimate of the living Christ, a repentant sinner, and a spiritual disciple of the Lord. As De Voragine states, "Mary made the best choices, namely the part of penance, the part of inward contemplation, and the part of heavenly glory."<sup>886</sup> The saint's early *vitae* claimed that, following Christ's death, Mary Magdalene and certain other disciples of Christ were set adrift in the Mediterranean and landed near Marseilles. After helping convert the Gauls to Christianity, the Magdalene retired to a cave at La Sainte Baume in the

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885. Katherine Ludwig Jansen, The Making of the Magdalene: Preaching and Popular Devotion in the Later Middle Ages (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 32–33.

886. De Voragine, Golden Legend, vol. 1, 374.

wilderness of Provence where she lived alone for thirty years: “There were no streams of water there,” De Voragine tells us, “nor the comfort of grass or trees.”<sup>887</sup> Every day, however, “at the seven canonical hours she was carried aloft by angels and ...heard the chants of the celestial hosts.”<sup>888</sup> If the Magdalene’s prostration and tears at the feet of Christ was considered exemplary, so was her lengthy, solitary, and arduous penance—including fasting and self-flagellation.<sup>889</sup> The Augustinian Jordan of Quedlinburg proposed that, of the three Marys who went to Christ’s tomb and found it opened (Mark 16:1), Mary Magdalene represented the state of penitence, the initial step on the road to Christ.<sup>890</sup>

The daily angelic interventions during which the saint was raised up and nourished by the sound of the heavenly hosts added a mystic dimension to her penitential experience. This ecstatic aspect merged with her contemplative role as Christ’s disciple to make of her the epitome of the contemplative mystic.<sup>891</sup> In 1488, Camilla Battista da Varano, a member of the order of the Poor Clares, wrote that Jesus “wanted to make ... of her a mirror, an example, the standard of the blessed contemplative life—for she remained in solitude unrecognized by the world for thirty-three years, where she tasted and felt the ultimate effects of love, as far as one is able to taste and feel them in this

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887. Ibid., 380.

888. Ibid.

889. Ibid., 224–30.

890. Jordan of Quedlinburg, Sermon 258, *Opus postillarum et sermonum Iordani de Tempore* (Strasbourg, 1483), cited in Jansen, *Making of the Magdalene*, 106.

891. Mary’s sitting at the feet of the Lord in the house of Martha is described as a contemplative act by the fourteenth-century Augustinian theologian and spiritual writer Agostino d’Ancona (Jansen, *Making of the Magdalene*, 117). According to McGinn, she was “a potent paradigm for Christian mysticism” (*Foundations of Mysticism*, 69).

mortal life.”<sup>892</sup> Significantly, Camilla grounds the Magdalene’s contemplative power on love, both Christ’s love for the Magdalene and the saint’s profound love for Christ, deepened and refined by her years of solitary prayer and reflection. The nun’s evocation of a contemplative life built on love certainly conforms to the expression, at once exalted and tender, of Del Mazziere’s Magdalene.

Jansen has argued convincingly that the mendicant orders of the late Middle Ages played an important role in cementing the Magdalene’s history of ascetic penitence and devotional practice into an integrated personality and in fostering her cult.<sup>893</sup> A wildly penitential Magdalene is graced with a vision of the Trinity in Botticelli’s Trinity with Saint Mary Magdalene, Saint John the Baptist, and Tobias and Raphael, known as the Palla delle Convertite (fig. 145). The altarpiece, painted for the main altar of the church of the convent of Sant Elisabetta delle Convertite in Florence, is usually given a date of 1493–95.<sup>894</sup> The convent belonged to an Augustinian order protected by Saint Mary

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892. Beata Camilla Battista da Varano (Clarissa di Camerino), “I dolori mentali di Gesu nella sua passion,” in Opere Spirituali, ed. Giacomo Boccanera (Jesi: Scuola Tipografica Francescana, 1958), 159, cited in Jansen, Making of the Magdalene, 278.

893. The Augustinian Hermits, in particular, were involved in encouraging the reform of prostitutes throughout Italy and northern Europe and in setting up convents for those prostitutes who did commit to changing their lives. Florence’s Sant’Elisabetta delle Convertite was prominent among these foundations. It was established in 1338 by a Santo Spirito confraternity, the Compagnia di Santa Maria delle Laude di Santo Spirito—who conducted their devotions in the Capponi Communion chapel—in response to the sermons of Simone Fidati di Cascia, one of Santo Spirito’s most admired preachers and spiritual writers (Jansen, Making of the Magdalene, 15).

894. Herbert P. Horne, Botticelli: Painter of Florence (London, 1908; Princeton University Press, 1980), 317–18. Yukio Yashiro first identified the Trinity as the Botticelli altarpiece located, according to the Libro di Antonio Billi, in the convent of the Convertite. Yashiro, Sandro Botticelli (London: Medici Society, 1925), 201, 228. See also Blume, “Studies in the Religious Paintings,” 16ff.; Lightbown, Botticelli, 202–207. The date of 1494 often given to the altarpiece reflects the completion of work done on the *cappella maggiore* of Sant’Elisabetta between 1491 and 1494. However, the accounts rendered to the prior of Santo Spirito for that work do not mention payments for the church’s altarpieces. Lightbown, Botticelli, 205; Rachel North, “The Holy Trinity with Saints John the Baptist, Mary Magdalene, Tobias and Raphael by Botticelli and assistants: A Technical Examination for Attribution,” The Conservator 21 (1997): 3. According to Heussler’s review of the dates proposed for the Botticelli Trinity, the majority of scholars suggest dates in the early 1490s (Die Trinität, 31–37). Recently, Padoa Rizzo has proposed, against the weight of the scholarship, that Botticelli’s 1470 Virgin and Child with Saints Magdalene, John

Magdalene and dedicated to reformed prostitutes who vowed to embrace a religious life in imitation of the saint.<sup>895</sup> The affairs of the convent, notably the decoration of their church, were directed by the Augustinian Hermits of nearby Santo Spirito.<sup>896</sup> As in the case of the Santo Spirito Trinity, the selection of the subject matter thus reflects the order's connection to the figure of Augustine, author of the De Trinitate.

Botticelli's strikingly dark and barren landscape stands as an almost literal rendition of De Voragine's wasteland "without grass or trees." Botticelli's Magdalene, emaciated and dressed only in her long hair, follows a traditional Tuscan type, given excruciating life and power by Donatello in his early fifteenth-century prototype.<sup>897</sup> By placing the saint against the uniform dark background of the cliffside, emphasizing the sharpness of her features and expressing her surprise through a stark gesture of raised hands and parted fingers, Botticelli perpetuates a Florentine artistic tradition that focused on the austerity and physical and psychological sufferings of penitence. Del Mazziere's interpretation of Mary Magdalene, based on the same penitential model, uses the saint's

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the Baptist, Francis, Catherine of Alexandria, Cosmas and Damian was the altarpiece of the church's *cappella maggiore*, while the Botticelli Trinity decorated the nun's choir at the church's entrance. Padoa Rizzo, "Botticelli: Due Tavole per le Convertite," in *Opere e Giorni: Studi su mille anni di arte europea dedicati a Max Seidel*, ed. Kaus Bergdolt and Giorgio Bonsanti (Venice: Marsilio, 2001), 355–62. However, the sheer size of the Trinity altarpiece suggests that it, and not the smaller Virgin and Child, was commissioned for the main altar

895. Italian members of the order were known as Monache Convertite di Santa Maria Maddalena; the arms of their Florentine convent were the Magdalene's jar of oil labeled CONVERTITE. Lightbown, Botticelli, 202.

896. Thus, on February 19, 1494, the prior of Santo Spirito at that time, Maestro Niccolo da Firenze—Fra Niccolo di Giovanni di Lapo Bichiellini, the presumed recipient of Michelangelo's Crucifix--certified the accounts delivered to him for the decoration of the church of Sant'Elizabetta, including its *cappella maggiore*. Lightbown, Botticelli, 205; North, "Holy Trinity," 2 n. 6.

897. Donatello's Magdalene was widely copied, among others by Desiderio da Settignano. Brunelleschi's Magdalene, carved for Santo Spirito—possibly for the Corbinelli chapel in the old church—disappeared in the 1471 fire. It is widely assumed to have assimilated and responded to Donatello's fierce psychological naturalism. Glenn Andres, John M. Hunisak, and A. Richard Turner, The Art of Florence, vol. 1 (New York: Abbeville Press, 1988), 557–59.

three-quarter profile, the flow of light on her cheek and her rippling mantle of hair and the elegance of her long joined hands to soften the figure. While Botticelli's altarpiece foregrounds Mary Magdalene's asceticism, Agnolo's appears to focus on the saint's act of prayerful contemplation. Significantly, at Santo Spirito, Mary Magdalene's pose and expression do not convey surprise. The focus of Agnolo's work is not a sudden marvelous vision, but an extended act of contemplative devotion.

In terms of the values associated with the worship of the Magdalene in the late Middle Ages and the early Renaissance, what distinguishes the Santo Spirito altarpiece is the expanded role given to hope. Jensen argued, on the basis of sermons from a wide variety of sources, that in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Saint Magdalene had become an emblem, not only of penitence and the contemplative life, but of hope for the sinner who truly and ardently repents.<sup>898</sup> In a number of images from the thirteenth century through the Renaissance, the Magdalene carries a scroll inscribed, "Do not despair those of you who are accustomed to sin. By my example return yourselves to God."<sup>899</sup> Thus, in the Cappella di San Benedetto at Santa Trinita in Florence, a fourteenth-century fresco, sometimes attributed to Cenni di Francesco di ser Cenni, represents the Magdalene receiving her final communion while the inscribed banderole curves over her head.<sup>900</sup>

In Del Mazziere's Trinity, this message of hope is delivered quite explicitly in the greening and flowering of Golgotha in the foreground of the painting and of the

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898. Jensen, Making of the Magdalene, 232.

899. The four examples cited by Jensen are thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Florentine works, figs. 40–43.

900. Jensen, Making of the Magdalene, 238, fig. 43.

penitential terrain behind the Magdalene (fig. 133). The saint kneels on the soft grass, among clusters of white flowers. Behind her red and white lilies bloom in tall profuse bunches. Nor is the cliffside behind her particularly barren; its slope is a green meadow, planted with tall green trees. Agnolo's Magdalene garden is not, however, his own *invenzione*. The trope of Mary Magdalene's soul transformed by penitence and devotion from a wasteland to a garden of delights was current in medieval sermons. In one Magdalene sermon, the Augustinian Hermit Gregorio da Cremona noted, "Agriculture consists of four things. It is in clearing, enclosing or guarding, cultivating and watering. The first is the confession of sins, the second the guarding of the senses, the third is the frequency of works, and the fourth the effusion of tears."<sup>901</sup>

Sermons on the Magdalene garden exemplify the contrast between the barren soul of the sinner and the fertile living soul of the devout Christian. In much the same way, the dark, arid landscape of Botticelli's Trinity at Sant'Elizabetta contrasts with the Magdalene's blooming meadow at Santo Spirito. Since the décor of Sant'Elizabetta was set up under the supervision of the Santo Spirito friars, it seems certain that Agnolo's advisor would have been familiar with Botticelli's work at Sant'Elizabetta. Indeed, the same friar—perhaps Fra Niccolò Bicchiellini, prior of Santo Spirito at the end of the quattrocento—may well have advised both artists. Thus, it is possible that the Magdalene garden of the Santo Spirito altarpiece was designed in response to and as a complement to Botticelli's wasteland landscape. While the first sets out unflinchingly the harsh austerity of penance, the second reveals the ultimate fecundity of that penance in the sweetness of its contemplative reward.

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901. MS Assisi 539, f 237v, cited in Jansen, Making of the Magdalene, 242.



The Magdalene's evolution from the radical penitent of Sant'Elizabetta to the Santo Spirito's contemplative penitent glowing with divine illumination in her garden of hope had another purpose. It conferred on her penitence the affirmative qualities that would make it an appropriate model for the Santo Spirito friars, rather than the repentant *convertite*. We noted earlier, on the hill behind the Magdalene, an isolated building with a *campanile*, which is probably a monastery. A close reading of the painting's surface clearly juxtaposes Saint Magdalene and the monastery, identifying the one with the other, just as Saint Anthony Abbot, in the Capponi Visitation, is connected to the hilltop monastery in that work. To refine these connections further, it is possible to read the figure of the Magdalene, depicted here as the hermit of La Sainte Baume and located next to an isolated monastery, as the embodiment of the more eremitical predisposition with the culture of the order. The Magdalene plays here again, in other words, the role of the contemplative Mary to Catherine's active Martha. Together the two saints embody the dual mission of the Augustinian mendicants prayer and deed in the service of God.

## **2. Saint Catherine of Alexandria**

As we have seen, Saint Catherine was believed to be a fourth-century virgin martyr, who by her wisdom and eloquence in defense of the Christian faith, converted fifty philosophers gathered by the emperor Maximus to debate her, as well as most of the emperor's court. In the previous chapter, I discussed Saint Catherine as the epitome of classical learning in the service of faith, a persona that contributed significantly to her popularity among the scholarly order of the Augustinian Hermits. While Mary Magdalene achieved purity through penance, Catherine died a virgin despite the temptations offered by her youth, beauty, and wealth and the entreaties of the emperor.

To that extent, their roles in this altarpiece are complementary. Indeed, Agnolo contrasts with some subtlety the gentle affectivity of the gaunt Magdalene with the composure of the blooming and lavishly robed princess, who gazes clear-eyed and intent at the crucified Christ.

De Voragine's popular life of Catherine presents the saint as a preacher and debater rather than a contemplative.<sup>902</sup> By the fifteenth century, however, an episode involving contemplative devotion and linked to the saint's intimate relation with Christ had become an accepted component of her *vita*. As a young girl, Catherine learned of Christianity from a Hermit, Adryan, who gave her an icon of Mary holding the Christ Child. Adryan told her to pray before the image, to contemplate it, and then to ask the Virgin to show Catherine her son. That night Catherine saw the Madonna and her Child in a dream, but Christ kept his back to her, even when she shifted her position in order to see him better. Both Catherine and Mary implored the Child to look upon her, but he replied that she was not sufficiently prepared. The next day, Catherine awoke in distress. She returned to the hermit, who further instructed her upon "the Christian mysteries." The following night, her dream returned, but this time the Christ Child "turned sweetly toward her his glorious countenance." Catherine prayed to him, while the Virgin questioned the Child about Catherine's spiritual progress; to which Christ answered that he was happy with her and willing to make her his spouse.

In Donato and Gregorio d'Arezzo's ca. 1330 panel Saint Catherine of Alexandria and Twelve Scenes from her Life, four of the twelve scenes are dedicated to the saint's religious education under the hermit Adryan and to her dream wedding. A Florentine panel, dated to the second half of the fourteenth century and given to the Master of the

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902. Supra, chap. 4, nn. 246, 247.

Orcagnesque Misericordia, displays Catherine at prayer before the icon, while Mary and the Christ Child approach (fig. 146).<sup>903</sup> Clearly, the episodes of Catherine's life that concerned her spiritual education were popular and had acquired considerable authority.

The narrative of Catherine's relationship with Adryan accomplished a number of useful functions within the biography of an extremely popular saint. It balanced Catherine's extensive pagan education with an episode of specifically Christian instruction. It also placed Catherine in the position of a novice in relation to a preexisting Christian authority and thus inscribed her piety institutionally within the Church. More specifically, the figure of Adryan, who combines eremiticism with catechism—the care and teaching of souls—shows an evident affinity with the characteristic mendicant *vita mixta*; he is, in other words, a hermit who acts very much like a friar. By giving Catherine an image to worship, Adryan focuses his teaching on devotional praxis—stimulating a deep love of Christ through extended prayer and the contemplation of an image. Catherine's initial failure to secure the Child's approval highlights the protracted and multi-staged character of the spiritual progress required to reach what is ultimately a *visio dei*, understood as Catherine's vision of a responsive and loving Christ. Thus, the extended episode of Catherine's Christian education may be seen as a modernization of her original *vita*, one that injected an affective current into her piety and introduced religious practices influenced by monasticism and practiced by the mendicant orders—solitary prayer, contemplation of a sacred image, meditation and the hope for the eventual experience of some form of union with the divine.

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903. Depictions of Catherine's conversion are included as well in Spinello Aretino's *Saint Catherine* cycle, a series of frescoes painted ca. 1387 in the Oratorio di Santa Caterina all'Antella in Bagno a Ripoli near Florence. The scene of Catherine's first encounter with the hermit Adryan takes up an entire page of the 1480–90 *Book of Hours of Engelbert of Nassau*.

While the tale of Catherine's mystic marriage with Christ does define the saint as Christ's ardent devotee, the insertion of that marriage within its original narrative context clarifies the contemplative character of that devotion and the meditative matrix out of which the mystic experience emerges. A devotional, meditative Catherine makes its appearance elsewhere in quattrocento and cinquecento art, as in Giovanni Bellini's 1490 Madonna and Child with Saints Catherine of Alexandria and Mary Magdalene, in which light plays a powerful descriptive and symbolic role, and in Titian's 1567 Saint Catherine of Alexandria at Prayer. Del Mazziere's Catherine, her eyes fixed on Christ and her whole body rising up to meet her ecstatic vision, fully expresses the contemplative aspect incorporated, by the fifteenth century, into the virgin martyr's underlying rational and active character. Catherine's wheel lying before her describes one of several framing curves that both ground and amplify the saint's body so that she seems to rise up from the circling mass of her drapery as if slowly propelled by a spring. Those features reappear in Raphael's ecstatic Saint Catherine of Alexandria, executed in Florence probably not many years later (fig. 147). Here the saint's coiled energy has gained power as an opulent spiral, but the magnetic pull on body and soul of the brilliant light that both represents and conceals the divinity remains very much the same.<sup>904</sup> Both devotional

Catherines are expressive of a reading of the saint's life that privileged her contemplative

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904. The commonalities between the Del Mazziere and Raphael Saint Catherines are striking. In both cases, the low wide neckline of Catherine's dress and her gathered hair reveal the creamy skin of her neck and chest, while her scarlet mantle falls in heavy supportive curves and drapes a solid thigh. Raphael's Catherine rests one hand upon her breast, in a gesture that suggests the impact of surging feeling, an emotive variant of Agnolo's Catherine, whose hands are crossed upon her breast. As we have seen, the posture of Del Mazziere's Catherine is rooted in a compositional narrative which includes the pendant Magdalene as well as Christ, the object of contemplation. In Raphael's case, there is no evidence that the artist's commission required him to represent his saint in an ecstatic pose in the midst of a landscape. This suggests that Raphael derived aspects of his Catherine from Agnolo's portrayal of the saint, rather than vice versa. Indeed, Raphael is believed to have executed his Saint Catherine in Florence in ca. 1507, at the very time during which he would have begun work on The Madonna del Baldacchino for the Dei chapel at Santo Spirito, and would have had good reason to visit the church and to examine its existing décor. Roger Jones and Nicholas Penny, Raphael (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983), 47.

piety, a piety that would have been particularly congenial to the Augustinian friars who already celebrated her as a representative of the harmonious convergence of pagan philosophy and Christian wisdom.

### **C. The Trinity as Throne of Grace**

#### **1. Derivation of the Iconography**

The doctrine of the Trinity, expressed in the sixth-century Athanasian Creed, asserts that, in order to attain salvation, a Christian is required to worship “one God in the Trinity and the Trinity in unity; neither confounding the persons nor dividing the substance.” The Creed rapidly acquired authoritative status and, by the tenth century, had been inserted into the Sunday liturgy. The medieval current of trinitarian Christianity expressed in the Creed and in Alcuin’s votive mass in honor of the Trinity culminated in the institution of the Feast of the Trinity in 1334. At the same time, representations of the Trinity and of individuals—saints, contemplatives or patrons of devotional works—praying to an image of the Trinity raise issues concerning the possibility and the significance of seeing and imaging in this life the true likeness of God. While the Gospel of John was clear on the subject—“No man has seen God at any time” (1:18)—Christian practice since the fourth century, at least, did include attempts to represent the triune God, as evidenced by the image of the Trinity in the center of Del Mazziere’s altarpiece.<sup>905</sup> Hildegard of Bingen and Joachim of Fiore in the twelfth century conceived of elaborate representations of the Trinity, both abstract and anthropomorphic. A luxurious illumination from a ca. 1300 treatise for the edification of Dominican nuns, La

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905. McGinn, “Theologians as Trinitarian Iconographers” in The Mind’s Eye: Art and Theological Argument in the Middle Ages, ed. Jeffrey Hamburger and Anne-Marie Bouché (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 186–207.

Sainte Abbaye, displays a nun in contemplation of a vision of the Trinity (fig. 148).

During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, saints such as Augustine and Jerome are frequently represented in ecstasy contemplating the Trinity as in a miniature of Augustine from the Belles Heures du Duc de Berry (fig. 149).

On the whole, the attitude of medieval and early Renaissance culture toward man's ability to see and to image God appears to have been one of consistent ambivalence. Michael Camille, for instance, draws our attention to a 1220 Psalter that contains an image of the Trinity contemplated by two nuns. The face of God the Father in that image is carefully concealed by a quatrefoil (fig. 150).<sup>906</sup> Discussing the representation of a *visio dei* granted to Saints Benedict and Paul in a fourteenth-century manuscript, the Omne Bonum (fig. 151), Camille notes the partition that divides the vision from the living couple at the bottom of the illumination.<sup>907</sup> The involvement of trinitarian ideas with the liturgy of the Mass, centered on the celebration of the Eucharist and thus on the story of mankind's salvation, raises another set of issues concerning the inherent Eucharistic inflection of Trinitarian representations.<sup>908</sup> By and large, such representations may be described as "economic," a term used by modern theologians to refer to the Trinity in terms of its involvement—or the involvement of each of its three persons—in the history of mankind. More rarely did such images speak of the

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906. The image itself may be described as ambivalent: although the Father's face is hidden, his body is entirely visible; moreover while one nun looks at Christ, the other gazes up at the partially concealed Father.

907. Michael Camille, Gothic Art: Glorious Visions (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1996), 125–27.

908. Lello Jacobone, "Mysterium Trinitatis: Dogma e Iconografia nell'Italia Medievale," Arte Christiana, 85 (1997): 52.

“immanent” Trinity --the presence or absence of the Trinity per se and the participation of humanity in that presence or absence.<sup>909</sup>

Medieval representations of the Trinity varied widely from the geometric configurations of Joachim of Fiore to the more prevalent horizontal image of three identical male figures seated side by side.<sup>910</sup> At times three identical heads sufficed, as in Filippo Lippi’s Vision of Saint Augustine for the predella of the 1438 Barbadori altarpiece in the sacristy of Santo Spirito (fig. 23). However, during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, one iconographic model, originating probably in the Mosan valley during the twelfth century, and known as the Throne of Mercy or Throne of Grace, became prevalent throughout the West. The image positions the Trinitarian persons in a vertical formation whereby God the Father holds up the arms of the cross on which Christ hangs crucified, while the Holy Spirit in the shape of a dove flies between the heads of the Father and the Son. This is the image displayed in the Corbinelli Trinity panel, as in most other quattrocento representations of the Trinity in Florence, notably Masaccio’s famous fresco in the nave of Santa Maria Novella.<sup>911</sup>

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909. The terms are defined along these lines in Roger E. Olson and Christopher A. Hall, The Trinity (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002), 3. McGinn describes the highly original images of the Trinity conceived by Hildegard of Bingen in the eleventh century and Joachim of Fiore in the twelfth as “economic” in that they refer primarily to the role of the Trinity in the story of salvation. On the other hand, the fourteenth-century Dominican Henry Suso pursued an “immanent” notion of the Trinity in his depiction of the flow of being from its root in the perfection of the Trinity through its invisible presence within humanity and back to its origin. McGinn, “Theologians as Trinitarian Iconographers,” 192, 195–202.

910. Joachim of Fiore, Liber Figurarum, Oxford, Corpus Christi College, MS 255a, f. 7 v, McGinn, “Theologians,” fig. 5. Herrad of Landsberg, Hortus Deliciarum, c.8, in Die Heilige Dreifaltigkeit, by Wolfgang Braunfels (Düsseldorf: L. Schwann, 1954), 24.

911. The few exceptions include, in addition to Filippo Lippi’s representation of the Trinity as three faces in the predella of Barbadori altarpiece (fig. 23), Donatello’s three-faced Trinity medallion for his 1420-25 tabernacle of Saint Louis at Orsanmichele.

Scholars have argued that the Throne of Grace is a composite of the Crucifixion image and the *Maiestas Domini* or Christ in Glory, an apocalyptic image in which the Christ of the Last Judgment is enthroned within a mandorla and, ordinarily, surrounded by the four beasts of the Apocalypse (fig. 152).<sup>912</sup> To the crucified Christ and the Christ in Glory was added the Holy Spirit in the shape of a dove. One of the earliest Thrones of Grace extant, a ca. 1132 engraved portable metal altar from Hildesheim (fig. 153) features only the bust and supporting hands of the Father; it has the effect of a Crucifixion to which a trinitarian aspect has been added.<sup>913</sup> On the other hand, the earliest representation extant of the Throne of Grace, an 1120 illumination from Cambrai (fig. 154) includes the beasts of the Apocalypse and generally emphasizes the *Maiestas Domini* at the expense of the Crucifixion. At the same time, the Son's inclusion in the aspect of Christ Crucified suggests that divine judgment is tempered by Christ's redemptive sacrifice.

This derivation certainly accords with the scriptural references to a throne where judgments are rendered by a merciful God. Isaiah 16:5 associates such a throne with both divine judgment and the tabernacle at the heart of the Jewish temple: "And a throne shall be prepared in mercy, and one shall sit upon it in truth in the tabernacle of David, judging and seeking judgment and quickly rendering that which is just." Similarly, in the New Testament Letter to the Hebrews 4:15–16, the Throne of Mercy refers to God's ultimate

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912. Sara Jane Pearman, "The Iconographic Development of the Cruciform Throne of Grace from the Twelfth to the Sixteenth Century" (PhD diss., Case Western Reserve University, 1974), 14. Otto von Simson, "Über die Bedeutung von Masaccios Trinitätsfresko in Santa Maria Novella," Jahrbuch der Berliner Museen 8 (1966): 125.

913. The Hildesheim altar also includes the sun and moon, characteristic of Crucifixion scenes at this period. Schiller argues broadly that the motif of the throne of mercy derived from images of the Crucifixion, to which the presence of God the Father served as an indication of God's acceptance of Christ's sacrifice (Ikonographie der christlichen Kunst, 122).



and compassionate judgment of the individual soul: “Let us go therefore with confidence to the throne of grace; that we may obtain mercy, and find grace in seasonable aid.”<sup>914</sup> According to Wolfgang Braunfels, the specific term *Gnadenstuhl* (mercy seat) was first applied to the Throne of Grace motif in the late nineteenth century by Franz Xavier Kraus, who himself lifted the term from Luther’s 1541 translation of the Bible.<sup>915</sup> Luther translated the references to a throne of mercy in Isaiah 16:5 as “Ein Stuhl ... aus Gnaden,” and in Hebrews 4:16 as “dem Gnadenstuhl.”<sup>916</sup> This formulation links the Lord’s throne of merciful judgment to the tabernacle of the Jewish temple and specifically to the cover of the Ark of the Covenant, the *kaporet*, a term that loosely translates as “atonement piece” or *propitiatorium* in the Vulgate, and is consistently translated by Luther as *Gnadenstuhl*.

From the propitiatory, built of gold and ornamented on either side with two open-winged gold cherubim, God spoke to Moses.<sup>917</sup> This locus where divinity manifests itself becomes associated with the notion of God’s seat or throne, as reflected in the reference to “the throne prepared in mercy ... in the tabernacle of David” in Isaiah 16:5. The role of the propitiatory as simultaneously a seat for God and a place of atonement receives a developed treatment in Leviticus 16:14–16. Following the punishment of the sons of Aaron, the high priest, God informs Moses that, in expiation of the sins of the “children

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914. Rona Goffen, “Masaccio’s *Trinity* and the Letter to the Hebrews,” in *Masaccio’s Trinity*, ed. Rona Goffen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 44.

915. In William Tyndale’s English translation of Luther’s Bible, the *Gnadenstuhl* became the Mercy Seat. According to Braunfels, Kraus’s iconographic *Gnadenstuhl* was later translated and disseminated by Panofsky as the Throne of Grace. Wolfgang Braunfels, *Die Heilige Dreifaltigkeit* (Dusseldorf: L. Schwann, 1954), XXXV.

916. The Vulgate version of Heb. 4:16 refers to the “thronium gratiae” for the Greek, “Thronos tos Charitos.” Braunfels, *Die Heilige Dreifaltigkeit*, XXXV.

917. Exod. 25:17–19. “Thence will I give thee orders, and will speak to thee over the propitiatory, and from the midst of the two cherubims, which shall be upon the ark of the testimony” (Exod. 25:22).

of Israel,” Aaron must perform sacrifices, then sprinkle the propitiatory with the blood of the sacrificed animals. Leviticus 16:14–16 thus connects the propitiatory, Luther’s *Gnadenstuhl*, with the notion of a collective sin expiated through sacrifice.

In the Letter to the Hebrews, the propitiatory or *Gnadenstuhl*, sprinkled with sacrificial blood, takes on the character of an altar, at once cleansed and cleansing. In Hebrews 9:11–12, Paul analogizes and contrasts the animal sacrifices conducted under the Old Law with the blood shed by Christ for mankind:

But Christ, being come an high Priest of the good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hand, that is, not of this creation: Neither by the blood of goats, or of calves, but by his own blood, entered once into the holies, having obtained eternal redemption.

Finally, Romans 3:23–25 conclusively links the place of propitiation, where God sits and speaks to mankind, to Christ’s sacrifice on the cross, endowing Christ himself with the title of *Gnadenstuhl* :

For all have sinned and do need the glory of God. Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption, that is in Christ Jesus, whom God hath proposed to be a propitiation (*Gnadenstuhl*) through faith in his blood, in the shewing of his justice, for the remission of former sins.

The constellation of scriptural associations that cluster around Luther’s *Gnadenstuhl* thus freight the term with notions of ultimate judgment associated with the self-revelation of a propitiated divinity whose mercy has been purchased by that divinity’s own self-sacrifice in the person of Christ.

As we noted, the Throne of Grace’s representation of the second person of the Trinity by means of the crucified Christ, in and of itself, manifests a primary reading of the Trinity in terms of Christ’s sacrificial and redemptory role, a reading that may be rooted in the liturgical context of the early Trinitarian cult. A West German illumination

from the second half of the twelfth century displays the Father with the crucified Christ suspended before him, while, below, projecting beyond the limits of the image into the text of the liturgy, a chalice collects the blood that flows down the cross (fig. 155).<sup>918</sup> The notion of God the Father receiving the dead Christ and holding him up for our contemplation corresponds to the sacramental offering accomplished during the mass, as well as to the liturgical text of the “Te igitur clementissime pater.”<sup>919</sup>

To what extent, beyond their recognition of the image’s Christological core, were medieval and early Renaissance theologians, patrons and artists sensitive to the scriptural typology of the Throne of Grace? A ca. 1140 window in the Saint Peregrinus chapel in the Cathedral of Saint Denis in Paris displays, in its topmost medallion, God the Father standing behind an altar-like structure and holding up a crucifix whose foot rests before him on the altar (fig. 156). The image clearly connects the Father and the cross that bears the Crucified Son to the propitiatory that covers the Ark. An inscription at the base of the image reads: “On the Ark of the Covenant is established the altar with the Cross of Christ; Here Life wishes to die under a greater covenant.” This image, however, is virtually unique.<sup>920</sup> We do find a developed textual reference to the typology of the

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918. In her discussion of the image, Schiller notes: “the words ... below the miniature refer to Jesus Christ who seeks to be the Salvation of the world” (*Ikongraphie der christlichen Kunst*, 2:122–23, figs. 12–16). Schiller and Braunfels agree that the early examples of the throne of mercy emerged from a liturgical and Eucharistic context, in which Christ is both priest and sacrifice. “The determining motive is less the fact that the three persons of the Trinity are represented than that God the Father holds the Cross with his hands, either to accept it as an offering, or to hand it over to mankind as a ‘propitiatory,’ a means of atonement.” Braunfels, *Die Heilige Dreifaltigkeit*, XXXVIII.

919. The first few lines of the *Te igitur* translate: “We therefore most merciful Father suppliantly request and beg you through Jesus Christ your Son and our Lord to consider accepted and to bless these gifts, these offerings, these holy unimpaired sacrifices.” Braunfels, *Heilige Dreifaltigkeit*, XXXVII; Schiller, *Ikongraphie der christlichen Kunst* 2:123–24; Pearman, “Iconographic Development,” 9–10; Goffen, “Letter to the Hebrews,” in *Masaccio’s Trinity*, 57.

920. A somewhat later version of the same image appears in a window of the Church of the Sainte Trinité at Vendôme; the Sainte Trinité window includes the dove of the Holy Spirit omitted at Saint Denis. Pearman, “Iconographic Development,” 12.

Crucified Christ and the propitiatory in Saint Bonaventure's guide to meditative praxis, the 1259 Itinerarium Mentis in Deum. While Bonaventure does not allude specifically to the iconography of the Throne of Grace, he clearly identifies the Trinity with the Holy of Holies at the heart of the temple. The saint discusses an interior journey of contemplative progress towards the Trinity as the iterative penetration of the Tabernacle in the light of Christ. The third stage of the journey allows the mind to "enter with the High Priest into the Holy of Holies, where the Cherubim of Glory stand over the Ark, overshadowing the *propitiatorium*." At the sixth and final stage, Christ is defined as "the *propitiatorium* above the Ark of God: ... He who turns his full countenance toward this *propitiatorium* ... beholds Christ hanging on the Cross."<sup>921</sup>

The 1424 Throne of Grace painted by Masaccio in Santa Maria Novella departs from iconographic precedent in omitting both the throne and the mandorla (fig. 157). In fact, the fresco's entire composition, within its illusionistic chapel, refers to the role of Christ as new *propitiatorium*. The large "box like structure" situated behind the crucifix has been identified as the Ark of the Covenant.<sup>922</sup> God, as we would expect, does not stand upon the Ark, but on its cover, the propitiatory. Masaccio's barrel-roofed chamber is thus the Holy of Holies in the heart of the temple, or in the language of the Hebrews 9:11–12, the "greater and more perfect tabernacle," entered by Christ "by his own blood ... having obtained eternal redemption."<sup>923</sup>

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921. Bonaventure, Itinerarium in Mentis Deum, 3, 1 and 7, 1 and 2. Pearman, "Iconographic Development," 32. Bonaventure specifically associates the *propitiatorium*, the Trinity and Christ on the Cross; Pearman appears to be incorrect, however, in suggesting that the saint refers to the specific image of the Throne of Mercy.

922. Shearman, Only Connect, 64.

923. Goffen, "Letter to the Hebrews," in Masaccio's Trinity, 43–64.

Masaccio's fresco suggests that the typology that linked the Throne of Grace to the *propitiatorium* was still potent in fifteenth-century Florence. In that light, we can identify the cherubim present in most representations of the Throne of Grace as allusions to the cover of the Ark of the Covenant decorated with golden cherubim. In Tuscany, as the image of the Throne of Grace was standardized through the course of the trecento and quattrocento, the motifs of the mandorla and that of the cherubim became virtually inseparable.<sup>924</sup> The cherubim who surround God the Father's mandorla are thus the pictorial descendants of the paired golden cherubim that cover the propitiatory as prescribed by God in Exodus 25:18–20. It is “from the midst of the two cherubim” that God speaks to Moses.<sup>925</sup> Paolo di Giovanni Fei's 1407–8 Trinity altarpiece (fig. 158) fairly bristles with cherubim who hold up the Father's elongated mandorla, clearly playing the role of divine supports that they assume in 1 Kings 4:4 and 2 Kings 6:3.<sup>926</sup> In a mid-quattrocento Trinity with Saints from the Pieve San Stefano in Montefioralle, cherubim outline God's mandorla, while two pairs of larger cherubim support the Father's seat and his feet (fig. 159). A blood-red cherubim pair support the highly foreshortened Throne of Grace in Castagno's 1454–55 Vision of Saint Jerome (fig. 160).

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924. By the end of the trecento, there appear to have been two principal variants of the Throne of Grace in Tuscany: The first type seated the Father against a gold background on a throne impressively covered in a patterned cloth of honor, as in Nardo di Cione's fourteenth-century Holy Trinity with Saints Romuald and John the Evangelist in the Accademia in Florence. The alternate form, which had become pervasive by the fifteenth century, retained the traditional *Maiestas Domini*, locating the Father in the Heavens within a mandorla, as in Paolo di Giovanni Fei's Trinity altarpiece (fig. 158). Michael Mallory, “An Early Quattrocento Trinity,” The Art Bulletin 48 (1966): 85–89.

925. Exod. 25:22. Similar cherubim are reduced in number but more prominent in Andrea di Bartolo's early fifteenth-century Trinity. Millard Meiss, “Italian Primitives at Konopiste,” The Art Bulletin, 28, (1946): fig. 3; Mallory, “Early Quattrocento Trinity,” 88 n. 24.

926. “So the people ... brought ... the ark of the covenant of the Lord of hosts sitting upon the cherubims” (1 Kings 4:4). “And David arose ... to fetch the ark of God upon which the name of the Lord of hosts is invoked, who sitteth over it upon the cherubims” (2 Kings 6:3).

The apogee of cherubic involvement, however, is Alesso Baldovinetti 1471 Trinity with Saints Benedict and John Gualberto, in which God the Father hovers in a veritable flotilla of clouds and cherubim (fig. 161).<sup>927</sup>

Thus, the delicate, mobile cherubim of Del Mazziere's Trinity derive from a conventional pictorial allusion to the Ark of the Covenant and accordingly imply divine presence and divine propitiation. The Santo Spirito Trinity, however, presents us with another allusion, in the same vein, to the scriptural typology of the Throne of Grace. This is the prominent, even emphatic, use of gold for the altarpiece's *paliotto*, its frame, and the decorative details of the panel and the predella (fig. 6). We noted earlier Agnolo's lavish use of gilding to bring out the halos and the ornaments of the figures' clothes, the light rays, rippling clouds and cherubim wings of the mandorla, and the dramatically receding cloud bank that links the mandorla to the painting's recessed landscape. While all this gilding is handled with delicacy, it creates the impression that the artist was obeying a specific directive to use gold leaf unstintingly, wherever he possibly could. The effect is further enhanced by the rich gold hue of the dawn light that invades most of the sky depicted in the panel and saturates with gold the background landscape. At the same time, the foreground figures of Christ and the two saints are depicted as if they, as well, were bathed in golden light from a source to the front left of the painting; the body of Christ, in particular, has a distinct gray-gold hue that gives it the appearance of being fashioned out of gold.

As we noted earlier, the goal that each chapel have a unified décor appears to have been well established at Santo Spirito at least during the fifteenth century. We also

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927. The immense flock of cherubim in the upper part of Giovanni Antonio Sogliani's early sixteenth-century Trinity with Saints James Major, Mary Magdalene and Catherine at San Salvi in Florence clearly derive from Baldovinetti's earlier work.

noted that the lavish and aesthetic use of gold leaf in the Trinity altarpiece and its frame redounded to the honor of the lay patrons, Matteo Corbinelli and his descendants.

However, in light of the painting's subject matter—the Throne of Grace “amidst the cherubim”—it seems very likely that the friars advising Del Mazziere intended that the unified golden artifact, created out of the altar-frontal, the altarpiece and the frame, refer to the propitiatory above the Ark of the Covenant. The elaborate descriptions of the furnishings of the Holy of Holies in chapters 25 and 37 of Exodus state insistently that virtually every object be made of, or overlaid with, gold. The Ark itself is overlaid with gold “within and without.” The propitiatory is made of “the purest gold,” while the cherubim, on the two sides of the propitiatory, are made of “beaten gold.”<sup>928</sup>

The location of the Trinity altarpiece in the chapel adjacent to the Communion chapel, where the body and blood of the sacrificed Christ are kept, makes the Eucharistic typology of the tabernacle particularly appropriate. Indeed, the intent of the altarpiece's iconographers may have been to bring both chapels together conceptually and visually by means of this overarching scriptural reference. In the first tabernacle of the Jewish temple, the high priest performs sacrifices upon an altar of brass. Once these sacrifices are accomplished, he may enter the Holy of Holies, where God appears between “the cherubim of Glory overshadowing the propitiatory.”<sup>929</sup> Hebrews 9:11–12 transfers the sequence to Christ, at once high priest and sacrifice: “But Christ, being come an high Priest of the good things to come ... by his own blood, entered once into the holies, having obtained eternal redemption.” While the Communion chapel refers to the sacrifice of Christ, accomplished in the first tabernacle, the Saint Magdalene chapel plays the role

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928. Exod. 25:11, 17–18; 37:1, 6–7.

929. Heb. 9:5.

of Holy of Holies, in which the triune God is revealed on the propitiatory “of the purest gold” between the cherubim of “beaten gold,” holding up the sacrificed Son, sign of his propitiation. The gold saturating the Corbinelli Trinity thus allowed it to set the stage for a contemplative exercise, which located the Throne of Grace depicted on the panel within a scriptural nexus that included the nearby Communion chapel. It is likely that such a reading of the chapel and its furnishings was one among many possible readings and one that would have been more congenial to the friars than to the lay patrons, whose principal focus may have been the chapel’s titular saint, the Magdalene. The reading does support, however, my contention that the Hermits at Santo Spirito were closely involved in the composition of at least some their church’s altarpieces, and that one of the purposes of their involvement was to foster associative readings and even imaginative visual play that would enrich their meditative exercises.

## **2. The Throne of Grace and Its Beholders**

The themes of divine judgment and redemptive sacrifice with which the Throne of Grace was freighted affected its representation throughout the medieval and early Renaissance periods. In Books of Hours, the Throne of Grace is often displayed in the presence of praying patrons, who insert themselves into the image, thus defining it as an object of supplication.<sup>930</sup> One such miniature from the Psalter of Elizabeth features the Landgrave Hermann von Thüringen and his wife kneeling below an immense image of the Throne of Grace (fig. 162). His hands are joined in prayer, while hers are parted in an animated gesture of entreaty. They kneel on the image’s frame as if poised assertively at the threshold of sacred space. Von Samson described such images in terms of an

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930. Von Simson, “Über die Bedeutung,” 130.



imaginary “dialogue” between the beholder—the viewer within the image and the viewer without—and the triune God.<sup>931</sup> In this dialogue, the figure of the crucified Son within the Throne of Grace plays the role of intercessor, creating a surprisingly intimate bond between the deity and the individual supplicant. In his manual, *Sic card of Cremona* (1160–1215) describes his reaction to the image of the Throne of Grace as an intensely affective response to the Trinity itself: “In some [mass] books the majesty of the Father and the cross of the crucifix are portrayed so that it is almost as if we see at present the one we are calling to, and the Passion which is depicted imprints itself on the eyes of the heart.”<sup>932</sup> In the context of the small-scale devotional images discussed here, we might describe the relationship between the Throne of Grace and its viewer as one of mutual affective exchange, in which the beholder absorbs the sorrows of the Trinitarian “family,” to use a term explored by Timothy Verdon,<sup>933</sup> while the deity acknowledges the viewer in light of the redemption effectuated by Christ.<sup>934</sup>

Closer in time and place to our altarpiece, a 1480–85 Florentine votive panel, The Trinity with the Virgin, Saint John and Donors by Jacopo Del Salado (fig. 163), shows us a widowed father mourning the death of his wife and daughter, who lie at the foot of the cross; Mary reaches her arms out consolingly to the widower, while nearby his young son

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931. Ibid., 131.

932. Siccard of Cremona’s, *Mistrale liber III*, Pat. Lat. 213, 124 C, cited in Belting, *The Image and Its Public in the Middle Ages: Form and Function of Early Paintings of the Passion*, trans. Mark Bartusis and Raymond Meyer (New Rochelle, NY: Aristide D. Caratzas, 1981), 6.

933. Timothy Verdon, “L’amore, la famiglia e la città: La *Trinità* di Masaccio in contesto,” in *La Trinità di Masaccio: Arte e teologia*, ed. Severino Dianich and Timothy Verdon (Bologna: Edizione Dehoniane, 2004), 127–43.

934. The large number of small-scale fifteenth-century woodcuts of the Throne of Grace printed in the north, works in a different medium and directed toward a broader social spectrum than the miniatures discussed by Von Simson, suggests that the motif was indeed highly responsive to the needs individual beholders; see *The Illustrated Bartsch*, 96 vols. (Norwalk, CT: Abaris Books, 1978– ).

weeps in the embrace of Saint John the Evangelist.<sup>935</sup> Here again the sorrow and the consolation is mutual and participatory; the donor and his son share the grief of Mary and John, while the Crucifixion saints console the widower and his child.

In the examples of the Throne of Grace that we have just discussed, the manifestation of the Trinity as divine revelation takes second place to affective participation. As divine presence, however, the Throne of Grace also makes its appearance in contexts where a contemplative or ecstatic figure mediates its relationship with the viewer. The illumination from La Sainte Abbaye, mentioned earlier, illustrates a nun's progress in the art of contemplative devotion (fig. 148).<sup>936</sup> The nun's path leads her from penitence to prayer before an actual image, a statue of the Coronation of the Virgin, and culminates in two visions. The last of these is a vision of the Trinity, imaged as the Throne of Grace. The image is clearly not presented as an intercessory symbol, but rather as a manifestation of the deity in its true—trinitarian—nature. Even that purpose is subordinate to the broader intent of the treatise, which is to portray in its last panel the ultimate, most accomplished form of contemplation. The perfection of the nun's devotion is thus manifested by the trinitarian aspect of her vision of the divine. The apparition of the Trinity plays here a role similar to that of the sixth day vision described by Saint Bonaventure in his Itinerarium mentis in Deum; it is the ultimate goal of an extended, arduous process of contemplative praxis.

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935. The panel is briefly discussed by Von Simson ("Über die Bedeutung," 142) and Verdon ("L'amore, la famiglia e la città," 140).

936. Jeffrey M. Hamburger, "The Visual and the Visionary: The Image in Late Medieval Monastic Devotions," Viator 20 (1989): 174–75; Michael Camille, Gothic Art: Glorious Visions, 120–23; Belting, Likeness and Presence, 413.

Fourteenth- and fifteenth-century images of Saint Augustine contemplating the Trinity depend upon a similar reading, inflected with a specifically Augustinian bent. The fifteenth-century Belles Heures illumination, in which Saint Augustine contemplates the Throne of Grace, a celestial apparition that descends upon him in a curly blue nimbus, is included among the Belles Heures suffrages of the saints (fig. 149). The suffrages consist of miniatures in which each saint is shown with an attribute or involved in an event representative of his or her sanctity. Saint Augustine is shown having reached the summit of contemplative piety, as displayed by his vision of the Triune God, the supreme object of contemplation. The distinction made here between what could be termed “intercessory” and “devotional” images of the Throne of Grace bears a resemblance to the difference between what have been termed the “economic” and “immanent” approaches to the Trinity. In the first case, the image conveys a message of hope to the viewer through the Trinitarian presentation of Christ’s redemptive sacrifice; in the second, it speaks of participation, through a lengthy contemplative undertaking, in the true Trinitarian nature of the divinity.

In the case of many complex, multifigured compositions, both aspects of the Trinity—its relationship to humanity and its own mysterious nature independent of human history—would have been of concern to the work’s patrons. The Trinity by Jacopo del Sellaio mentioned above (fig. 163) speaks to the viewer in a highly emotional and personal tone and thus appears to perform an exclusively “economic” function. However, scattered throughout the background of the painting are eight narrative vignettes from scripture and from the lives of Saints Augustine, Francis and Jerome. It is quite likely that these scenes constituted collectively a devotional map that guided the

beholder—presumably the widowed patron—through a variable sequence of prayers and meditations that may have culminated in his contemplation of the Trinity itself, imaged as the Throne of Grace.

The foregrounded Throne of Grace of the Corbinelli Trinity certainly addresses the spectator with great immediacy, indicating, it seems, a paramount “economic” purpose. Concerns about life after death and the intercessory role of the Redeemer are likely to have been of great importance to the Corbinelli family members who patronized the Saint Magdalene chapel. The relevance of the family and its concerns is asserted by the male and female portraits—in the tradition of the patron portraits mentioned by Von Simson—kneeling respectively to the left and right of the altarpiece predella. The prominence and naturalistic treatment of the skull of Adam and the bleeding body of Christ speak in clear and concrete terms about the heavy weight of original sin and the enormity of Christ’s sacrifice. Indeed, aside from possible references to the Ark of the Covenant, the location of the Saint Magdalene chapel next to the Communion chapel suggests that the Eucharistic concerns evident in the altarpiece were important to both the lay patrons and the Santo Spirito community.<sup>937</sup>

At the same time, for the friars of Santo Spirito, Saints Magdalene and Catherine kneeling in contemplation of the Trinity would have represented a model of meditative praxis. Not only are their prayers addressed to Christianity’s central mystery, but, as the miniature from the Belles Heures illustrates, that mystery was of particular concern to their order’s reputed founder, Saint Augustine. In addition, the foregrounding of divine

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937. Writing of the Eucharistic concerns exhibited in the Throne of Grace image, Eve Borsook notes the proximity of the Santo Spirito Trinity to the Communion chapel. The Mural Painters of Tuscany: From Cimabue to Andrea del Sarto, revised 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 58, 62 n. 23.

compassion in the particular Trinitarian iconography of the Throne of Grace may well have made it all the more compelling to the friars. The iconography's pictorial assertion that there is no revelation of God's true nature without divine compassion, no divine presence without *caritas*, would surely function, in a convent of Augustinian friars, to promote among its members the Augustinian sensibility that lovingly apprehends a deity coexistent with and manifesting itself as Love.<sup>938</sup>

### 3. The Throne of Grace in Quattrocento Florence

The impulses of quattrocento artists in the direction of persuasive naturalism in the service of compelling narrative specificity encouraged them to define and develop a physical setting for the Throne of Grace; such a setting was ordinarily organized around a Crucifixion scene at the base of the cross, as in the Trinity at Montefioralle (fig. 159).<sup>939</sup> At the same time, the Throne of Grace remained an additive image, constructed by superimposing two separate motifs, Christ in Glory and the Crucifixion, to which was joined the dove of the Holy Spirit. Certain components of the motif were better suited than others to being inserted into a naturalistic setting. While the figure of the Crucified Christ could be rendered in plastic and volumetric forms, the mandorla in which God the Father is seated remained a rigid one-dimensional object showing clearly its derivation

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938. To paraphrase Gertrude Schiller, the nature of God's being is revealed through the sacrifice of his son. Schiller, Ikonographie der christlichen Kunst, 219.

939. This development is encapsulated by the expansion of the Crucifixion terrain in late fourteenth-century triptychs that display the Throne of Grace in their central panel. The Crucifixion landscape, limited to the rock of Golgotha in the main panel of Nardo di Cione's Holy Trinity (supra, n. 907) unfolds in the three sections of the predella. In Mariotto di Nardo's later triptych, The Trinity with Saints Anthony of Egypt, George, Francis and Julian at Santa Trinità in Florence, the landscape has spread to the main level of the subsidiary panels. The quattrocento unified panel, dedicated to a similarly unified pictorial narrative, would further encourage the development of a setting organized around the Crucifixion narrative.

from twelfth-century illumination and relief sculpture (fig. 152).<sup>940</sup> Moreover, the sharp-edged flatness of the mandorla tends to turn the sky in which it hangs suspended from a three-dimensional representation of open space into a flat backdrop. Late to mid-quattrocento Florentine artists who portrayed the Throne of Grace appear to have been aware of the formal complexity of their subject. They employed a variety of means clearly aimed at assimilating the motif into their compositions and maintaining its underlying cohesion.

In his highly original 1450 Holy Trinity with Saints Jerome, Paula and Eustachion (fig. 160), Andrea Castagno released the cross from the landscape and thus forcibly detached the Throne of Grace from the picture plane. Strenuously foreshortened, the Throne of Grace is portrayed as an object in motion, rushing forward above the heads of the rapt spectators, a wake of clouds streaming behind it. This unusual presentation has the effect of giving depth to the sky, which now appears to reach back beyond the foreground figures to the mountain in the background.<sup>941</sup> While Castagno's foreshortened Throne of Grace does not appear to have found any imitators, Del Mazziere, among others, shows an awareness of his efforts to depict the sky as spatial depth rather than as pictorial ground.

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940. The *Maiestas Domini* on the Royal Portal at Chartres (fig. 152) is instructive; the crisp outline of God's mandorla is key to the tympanum's structure, a central and vertical element that visually holds together the multiple horizontal layers of which the tympanum is composed.

941. This effect of spatial recession is mitigated by the two forward-facing Cherubim at God's feet and the trail of crimson clouds, which seem to descend behind Jerome's halo rather than to retreat into the distance.

Pesellino's more conventional but highly influential Trinity with Saints Mamas, James the Great, Zeno and Jerome (fig. 164), completed by Filippo Lippi in 1458–60,<sup>942</sup> is a large and highly finished work that reveals some of the difficulties experienced by artists in handling the Throne of Grace. The commission documents specified that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit were to be placed at the center of the composition, with two saints on either side. Pesellino's Throne of Grace is, accordingly, located parallel to the picture plane and centered within it, features that not only draw attention to the flat and rigid mandorla but also encourage a reading of the motif as a two-dimensional form, dependent upon and subordinate to the picture plane. At the same time, the four saints placed to either side of the Trinity show no reaction to its presence; as a result the painting lacks a unifying narrative that would help insert the mandorla into its three-dimensional world. The artist did succeed in articulating his Throne of Grace into distinct receding planes by means of a clear progression in values—the pale body of the crucified Christ, the intermediary value of the Father's mantle, and the black interior of the mandorla. Overall, however, he mitigated the two-dimensionality of the mandorla primarily through the sense of grandeur created by the architectonic equilibrium of distinct, broadly conceived compositional components—background, saints, crucifix, mandorla. Despite its deep landscape and recessed mandorla, the composition operates almost exclusively at the level of the picture plane, primarily because Pesellino filled his sky with elegantly linear treetops and flying angels, details that function to obscure the problematic sky space and to unify the composition.

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942. Commissioned in 1455 by the Priests' Confraternity of the Most Holy Trinity in Pistoia for their church, the main body of the altarpiece was largely composed by Pesellino. It was completed and its predella was painted by Lippi following Pesellino's death in 1457. Ruda, Catalogue 53 in Fra Filippo Lippi, 449-452.

In devising his 1471 Holy Trinity with Saints Benedict and Giovanni Gualberto (fig. 161) for the main altar of Santa Trinita in Florence, Alessio Baldovinetti appears to have been acutely conscious of the difficulties of integrating the Throne of Grace into a naturalistically rendered setting. He chose instead to locate his Trinity in a purely celestial realm populated by innumerable cherubim and cherubic angels. While clouds provide a ground for the Trinity's kneeling spectator saints, the setting as a whole lacks a three-dimensional structure into which the Throne of Grace would have to insert itself. Meanwhile the flurry of cherubs, angels and clouds brings motion to the static Trinity image and creates a screen that avoids the effect of a flattened sky backdrop.

As we have seen, Botticelli's extremely large Palla delle Convertite<sup>943</sup> displays God the Father in a broad mandorla of cherubim, holding the crucifix between two rocky cliffs, which serve as backdrops for the penitent Magdalene on the left and the Baptist on the right (fig. 145). The landscape is limited to a dark and largely barren terrain that occupies foreground and middle ground, while the miniaturized figures of Tobias and Raphael venture off toward the left. The extent to which Botticelli's assistants collaborated with the master on this commission has been an object of dispute. Most recently, technical work undertaken at the Courtauld Gallery appears to confirm that the cherubim are the work of assistants, while the remainder of the panel is autograph.<sup>944</sup>

When nearing completion of the painting, Botticelli appears to have undertaken

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943. Measuring 2.15 by 1.91 m; the main panel of Pesellino's large Trinity with Saints measures 1.84 by 1.81 m; the Santo Spirito Trinity, on the other hand, measures 157 by 174.5 cm. Heussler, Die Trinität von Sandro Botticelli, 56 n. 146.

944. North, "Holy Trinity," 7. What remains unexplained is why, after spending time and effort working out a complex composition for what was clearly an important commission, Botticelli would have entrusted the prominent detail of the cherubim to assistants. The most likely explanation is that his revisions to the work took up more of the artist's time than he had budgeted; as a result, he may have found himself compelled to hand over the painting the cherubim to the workshop.



substantial revisions, eliminating a distant and verdant landscape that included a mountain, bridge and river. This recessed landscape also contained the first version of the figures of Tobias and Raphael, whose small size would have been appropriate to their background location.<sup>945</sup> As it is, the composition has an overstuffed quality with, in Rachel North's words, "the small figures appearing to attempt an escape from an already overcrowded scene."<sup>946</sup> Evidence of *pentimenti* in a number of areas, including that of the Magdalene and Christ's heads, also suggests the working out of a composition directly on the panel.<sup>947</sup>

Botticelli's initial design may well have resembled that of Pesellino's Pistoia Trinity (fig. 164). Here again, a massive Throne of Grace, facing the picture plane and located at its center, adheres to the panel surface. Infrared photography has shown that Christ's head, like that of Pesellino's Christ, was originally tilted further forward. As in the Pistoia altarpiece, the cross was planted in the foreground terrain, and a recessed landscape was visible below the seated figure of the Father.<sup>948</sup> On the whole, the effect of Botticelli's alterations to his initial design is to reduce spatial depth to its minimum.<sup>949</sup> He eliminated the recessed landscape and painted the entire terrain a dark brown-black so

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945. North, "Holy Trinity," 9.

946. Ibid., 11.

947. The difficulties encountered by Botticelli and his workshop may have been due to the number of individuals and institutions involved in the commission. They include, in addition to the artist himself, the abbess of Sant'Elizabetta, Suora Alessandra, the prior of Santo Spirito, Fra Niccolo Bicchiellini, as well as the lay patrons of Sant'Elizabetta, the Arte de' Medici e Speziali. Lightbown, Botticelli, 205–206; North, "Holy Trinity," 9. Yet, the involvement of several entities and individuals in the commission of religious works of art was common in fifteenth-century Florence and did not ordinarily result in the abrupt shift in direction that occurred in this case.

948. North, "Holy Trinity," 6.

949. Shallow compositions occur frequently in Botticelli's oeuvre, as in the Bardi altarpiece, where a wall of vegetation cuts off spatial depth (fig. 3).

that foreground and middle ground merge, forming a loosely conceived desert plateau. Christ's head has been pulled up so that it lies back flat against the cross. At the same time, the scarlet of God's robe and of the cherubim's wings bring the mandorla of the Father forward. The cross now rises up from immediately behind the plateau terrain. While the lower corner of the right arm is tucked behind the Baptist's head, *pentimenti* reveal that the artist prolonged the left arm so that it protrudes over the rock behind the Magdalene. Botticelli seems to have avoided defining a precise location for the cross within the landscape, and, as a result, it appears to be in rough alignment with the tall rock formation behind each saint.

Thus, at some juncture, apparently, Botticelli rejected the model of the Pistoia Trinity, and abandoned the attempt to increase the depth of his space and the three-dimensionality of his subject. Instead, his entire composition, including the Throne of Grace and the thick ring of cherubim, is largely planar. As a result, although the final design is cluttered, Botticelli did succeed in attenuating the formal conflict between a two-dimensional Throne of Grace and its three-dimensional setting.

Like his Florentine predecessors, the painter of the Santo Spirito Trinity strove to maintain the coherence and unity of the Throne of Grace form within a three-dimensional world. However, while Botticelli's work gives the impression of a composition worked out on the panel itself, Del Mazziere's painting appears to have been carefully thought out in advance in an attempt to balance surface pattern on the one hand and space and volume on the other. As in most of the altarpieces we have discussed, the Throne of Grace is located parallel to the picture plane and centered within it, a position that reinforces the mandorla's adhesion to the surface. The painter's affinity for detailed

ornament contributes to this effect; thus, the cluster of gold rays at the edges of and within the mandorla and the brightly gilded, scarlet-winged cherubim around it all project forward, in so doing, becoming part of the panel's exquisite surface decoration.

On the other hand, by locating the mandorla so that its topmost edge is sliced off by the frame, the painter hinted that the mandorla's existence was in fact independent of the picture-plane. He also introduced banks of rippling clouds around the contour of the mandorla, their hue determined naturalistically by the fall of the light, thus suggesting an effect of volume in space. At the same time, Agnolo attempted to conjure with the two-dimensional character of the mandorla by subdividing the Throne of Grace into an abbreviated upper section, which is relatively flat and hugs the painting's surface, and a more extensive, volumetric lower section, which includes the Crucified Christ and participates in the three-dimensional landscape. The arms of the cross function as a subdividing marker, as does the shift in the color of the surrounding sky from honey gold below to lavender blue above. Thus, the halo behind the head of God the Father—in the mandorla's upper section—is represented as a flat circle, as opposed to the foreshortened halos of Christ and the two saints. At the same time, Agnolo, like Pesellino and Baldovinetti before him, sought to alleviate the rigidity of the mandorla form by sweeping up his cherubim in eddies of restless movement. As a result, the delicate cherubim faces are captured at varied angles by an artist with a talent for portraiture, contributing their inherent freshness and three-dimensional naturalism to a static form. In the same fashion, the features of God the Father, a naturalistic study in sorrow, weariness and tight-lipped control, distract from the glittering surface effects of the mandorla behind him.

The lower section of the mandorla terminates, below the Father's mantle, in a trail of golden cloudbanks that recalls Castagno's Vision of Saint Jerome (fig. 160). Unlike Castagno's clouds, however, Agnolo's extend back in orthogonal formation, creating, instead of disrupting, the effect of recession in space. This effect of an accurate recession is particularly pronounced since the vanishing point of the orthogonals along the edges of the clouds coincides roughly with the vanishing point of the landscape orthogonals below (fig. 131). In addition, the dark gold of the receding cloud banks links them and the lower part of the mandorla from which they emanate to the intense flow of golden light that floods the sky. Nevertheless, it remains unclear whether the artist's receding clouds signal a point of origin for the mandorla, as in Castagno's fresco, or whether we must assume that the mandorla itself extends somehow backwards into space. Ultimately, Agnolo's subdivided mandorla remains an ambiguous object suggesting volume and locus within a three-dimensional world, but perpetually caught up by the painting surface and returned to its original flatness.

#### **4. Real Presence and the Throne of Grace**

Clearly, the formal problems involved in depicting the Throne of Grace within a three-dimensional setting were of concern to quattrocento Florentine painters and elicited considerable efforts on their parts. What was at issue was not only the coherence of the narrative image as a whole, but also the referential potential of the Throne of Grace. Discussing the essential characteristics of the religious sign, Jean Pierre Vernant once declared that the beholder of a religious object perceives the sacred in the gap that exists between the otherworld to which the religious sign refers and the immediacy of that sign's presence. The function of the sign is thus "to establish a real contact with the

beyond and to bring about its presence in this earthly world.”<sup>950</sup> Thus, Masaccio portrayed the persons of the Trinity as three-dimensional figures present at hand, so to speak, within his illusionistic chapel. At the same time, the heroic monumentality and impassivity of these figures conveys the effect of an “elsewhere” that has become momentarily available. Masaccio’s figures function to create a gap between here and there, because they convey “real presence,” the term that William Hood applied to the revolutionary three-dimensionality of Fra Angelico’s San Marco altarpiece.<sup>951</sup> In the altarpieces we have just discussed, on the other hand, the Throne of Grace is an additive image that includes a two-dimensional component, but lacks “real presence”; indeed, it is haunted by the likelihood of referential slippage. Within a multidimensional pictorial context, an image of God the Father in a flat mandorla pinned up on a flat sky refers, finally, to nothing more than the fact that it is an image with nothing to report about this world or another.

Slippage of this sort is evident in the last panel of the Sainte Abbaye miniature, in which a nun receives a vision of the Throne of Grace (fig. 148). The image is mentioned by Belting and Camille as an example of a vision that takes the shape of a current devotional object.<sup>952</sup> What is striking, however, is that, unlike the vision of the Man of Sorrows in the previous panel, the Trinity neither faces the nun nor appears to communicate with her. Instead, it is displayed parallel to the picture plane, just like the statue representing the Coronation of the Virgin in the panel immediately above it. In

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950. Jean Pierre Vernant, Myth and Thought among the Greeks, trans. Janet Lloyd and Jeff Fort (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983), 308, 314.

951. Hood, Fra Angelico at San Marco, 97.

952. Belting, Likeness and Presence, 412; Camille, Gothic Art: Glorious Visions, 120.

other words, although the artist intended to describe a vision, what we see looks merely like what we have—an image. The Florentine painters, whose altarpieces I have discussed, succeeded better than the Sainte Abbaye artist in creating --or, at least, substituting for-- a plausible sense of presence. Castagno's solution was not only to re-imagine the Throne of Grace as a vision, contemplated by Jerome and his followers, but also to detach the image forcibly from the surface plane. By depicting his four saints as somehow blind to the appearance of the Trinity, Pesellino rejected the vision narrative. Glued to the picture plane and recognized only by the gaze of the beholder, his Throne of Grace, for all its poise and grandeur, is, quite simply, an image. Baldovinetti departed from Pesellino's precedent by displaying his saints, who kneel on cloud banks in the foreground of the panel, in the act of responding to the drama of the Trinity's sudden apparition (fig. 161). At the same time, by including the secondary framing device of a curtain held open by angels,<sup>953</sup> he actually highlighted the artificiality of the motif. In other words, Baldovinetti played in theatrical terms with the notion that his trinitarian invention was not a reality present to the viewer who stood before it, but an elaborately rendered image. In so doing, he encouraged the viewer to accept and then to transcend the dichotomy of image and real presence in favor of a reading of the Trinity in terms of values suggested by the specific aesthetics of his image—grace, tenderness, sweetness and delight.<sup>954</sup>

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953. In Renaissance Florence, where altarpiece curtains were a necessary component of chapel décor, it is likely that a curtain within an altarpiece would have been associated with a painted image, rather than a theatrical performance. Paradoxically, Fra Angelico's assertively naturalistic San Marco altarpiece with its recessed landscape is also framed with a painted curtain. It is possible that such painted curtains were more readily used for altarpieces in *cappelle maggiore*.

954. Both the purposive theatricality of Baldovinetti's altarpiece and the values to which it refers have a strikingly Baroque flavor that brings to mind the illusionistic ceilings of Pietro da Cortona and Andrea Pozzo.

As we saw, Botticelli's reworking of his Holy Trinity with Saints Magdalene and John the Baptist (fig. 145) also reduces the spatial three-dimensionality of the setting so as to better integrate the Throne of Grace. Like Castagno and Baldovinetti, he clearly defines his Throne of Grace as an apparition, a vision specifically granted to the Magdalene, who raises her hands abruptly, fingers parted, in a gesture of surprise and wonder. At the same time, his simplified and compressed composition pulls its various elements --the bare and somber landscape, the adoring saints and the Trinity-- closer together, creating a cumulative emotional impact. That the effect Botticelli sought was an affective one is clear, not only from the Magdalene's gesture, but also from the intense expression of tenderness and sorrow on the face of God the Father. Despite the congested composition, Botticelli's Throne of Grace attains, as a result, a different kind of "presence," emerging from its subjection to the mandorla design as a palpable and immediate embodiment of pathos. Botticelli's rhetorical purpose is clear: As Lightbown has emphasized, he was addressing the repentant courtesans and prostitutes of Sant'Elizabetta and their Augustinian supervisors and mentors. The Convertite, who modeled their lives on Saint Mary Magdalene, required an image that spoke to them in affective terms of the power and texture of that saint's repentance and of the rewards of her faith. The emotional impact of Botticelli's composition has a strong Augustinian flavor; indeed, it may well have been the Augustinian Hermits of Santo Spirito, in their supervisory role over the *monache*, who prompted the artist to image his Trinity as a palpable expression of the divine *caritas* at the heart of the Throne of Grace.

As we saw, in his treatment of the Throne of Grace motif, Del Mazziere melded and refined the influences of his Florentine predecessors. His Trinity is a vision

perceived by the kneeling saints and thus a part of the painting's narrative. At the same time, Like Pesellino and unlike Botticelli, Agnolo strove to balance the flattened effect of the Father's mandorla with a broad and deeply recessed landscape. His highly decorative treatment of the mandorla, a treatment that allies lavish gilding to exquisite rendering of the cherubim heads, essentially makes a virtue of the mandorla's adherence to the picture plane, conveying a sense of a refined presence that may be described as aesthetic. To that extent, Del Mazziere, like Baldovinetti, encourages us, or rather seduces us, into accepting the Throne of Grace as pure image.

At the same time, the painter appears to have centered his depiction of the Throne of Grace on his representation of the Crucified Christ, a figure that is at once convincingly detailed, individually specific and compellingly elegant. The placement of Christ in the immediate foreground of the painting, leaning forward so as to virtually enter the viewer's space, effectively distracts from the ambiguity of the Throne of Grace's referential status. Finally, and importantly, the painter translated Botticelli's powerful effect of pathos into his own gentler idiom. Affectivity here is restrained; the Magdalene does not gesture in surprise and awe, the face of God the Father is reticent in its sorrow. At the same time, pathos is more widely conveyed, by the tenderness of the Magdalene's expression, the quiet yearning suggested by the raised posture and fixed attention of both saints and, most forcibly, by the meeting in the body of Christ of beauty, concretely and specifically portrayed, and the fact of death.

#### **D. Saint Augustine and the Vision of God**

The formal and referential issues surrounding representations of the Throne of Grace in the quattrocento intersect with the broader concerns raised, as noted earlier, by



any portrayal of the true face of God, the triune Deity. Within an intellectual and institutional nexus constructed out of the writings and the *vita* of Saint Augustine, issues surrounding the imaging of God would have been particularly charged. I now propose to explore how Agnolo Del Mazziere and the Augustinian theologians who assisted him negotiated in pictorial terms the visible depiction of an invisible deity.

### 1. Writing the Trinity

The Belles Heures illumination in which Saint Augustine is shown gazing up at a celestial vision of the Throne of Grace (fig. 149) is one instance of an image popular in the trecento and quattrocento, particularly among the Augustinians. Donal Cooper has discussed the iconography in terms, among others, of the competitive relationship between the Hermits and other mendicant orders.<sup>955</sup> Unlike the illustration from the Belles Heures, most images of Augustine receiving a vision appear to involve a wound imprinted on the saint's heart; they are consistent, however, in portraying the divinity as the Trinity, usually in the aspect of the Throne of Grace. Thus, a fresco from Ottaviano Nelli's 1420–30 cycle of Augustine's life in the church of Sant'Agostino in Gubbio shows another variation on this theme. Kneeling in the doorway of a chapel, the saint gazes up at the Throne of Grace and opens the slit in his habit to reveal a miniature reflection of the image imprinted on his heart (fig. 165).<sup>956</sup> At Santo Spirito itself, in the predella of Filippo Lippi's 1437–39 Barbadori altarpiece, Augustine is portrayed as a

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955. Donal Cooper, "St. Augustine's Ecstasy before the Trinity in the Art of the Hermits, c.1360–c.1440," in Bourdua and Dunlop, Art and the Augustinian Order, 184–204. The Franciscan and Dominican orders had each developed an image of their founder in ecstatic communication with Christ; the former had popularized the motif of the stigmatization of Saint Francis, the latter, the miracle of the speaking crucifix.

956. Cooper, "Augustine's Ecstasy," 186–88, fig. 58.

Hermit friar in his study, wounded by arrows that emanate from the Trinity—imaged, this time, as three cherub heads (fig. 23).

Scholars agree that one source for such images is a sentence from Book IX of the Confessions: “You had pierced our hearts with the arrows of your charity, and we carried your words with us as though they were staked to our living bodies.”<sup>957</sup> The iconography thus speaks to the viewer in the highly emotive and personal language of the Confessions. At the same time, the God who is the source and object of Augustine’s longing appears to him in the aspect of the Trinity, the subject of the saint’s De Trinitate. Appropriately, in some of these images, such as the Belles Heures illumination (fig. 149) and the Barbadori altarpiece predella (fig. 23), Augustine is shown pen in hand, manuscript before him, interrupted by his ecstatic vision in the act of writing. The vision he receives may thus function, not only to display what the saint saw in a moment of ecstasy, but also to tell us about what subject he was writing. He was writing about the deity in the aspect of the Trinity; in other words he was writing the De Trinitate.<sup>958</sup>

These images suggest that, in the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance, one way in which the figure of Saint Augustine was perceived was through the prism of his opus, the De Trinitate, and that he was identified with devotion to God as Trinity. Something of the tenor of that reputation, as it affected the patrons and artists that dealt with images of the Trinity, can be judged by Filippo Lippi’s central predella panel for Pesellino’s

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957. A 1374 fresco in the Augustinian Hermit church of San Salvatore in Lecceto shows the saint displaying the wound on his chest and holding a scroll inscribed: “Vulnerasti cor meum de charitate tua” (You have wounded my heart with your charity). Jeanne Courcelle and Pierre Courcelle, Iconographie de Saint Augustin: Les cycles du XIVe siècle (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1965), 97; Van Fleteren and Schnaubelt, “Literary Sources,” 25; Cooper, “Augustine’s Ecstasy,” 197.

958. Alternatively, Augustine may be shown writing the Confessions—and specifically writing about the wound inflicted by God’s charity. Even in that case, the deity who wounds Augustine is the Trinity. The saint is thus consistently linked to God in his trinitarian aspect.

Pistoia Trinity (fig. 166).<sup>959</sup> The panel illustrates the legend of Saint Augustine's exchange with a child on the seashore:<sup>960</sup> While engaged on his opus on the Trinity—in Lippi's panel, the saint is leaning back against his desk—Augustine was walking on the beach, meditating on his subject, when he came upon a child who was endeavoring to empty the sea with a spoon and to pour it into a hole in the ground. When Augustine remonstrated with him, the child replied that to try to understand the Trinity was an even more foolish undertaking. The child, of course, was Christ, as indicated by his golden halo in Lippi's panel.<sup>961</sup>

Each of the other predella panels of the altarpiece describes an episode from the life of the saint placed above it in the main field. The Leningrad panel, however, was originally located at the center of the predella beneath the Throne of Grace. In other words, the saint's identification with the Trinity was so authoritative that an episode from his life involving his authorship of the De Trinitate was treated as a narrative sign, a metonymy in some sense, for the Trinity itself.

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959. As it now stands, in the National Gallery in London, that altarpiece includes four predella sections, each featuring an event from the lives of the saints in the main panel. In 1996, it was recognized that the predella also included a central panel, identified as a Vision of Saint Augustine, now in the Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg. Dillian Gordon, "The 'Missing' Predella Panel from Pesellino's Trinity Altarpiece," The Burlington Magazine 138 (1996), 87-88.

960. In his predella panel, however, Lippi depicted the sea as a river.

961. The legend most likely originated from an apocryphal letter to Cyril of Alexandria in which Augustine wrote of hearing a voice from heaven asking him, "Augustine, Augustine, quid quaeris? Putasne brevi immitere vasculo mare totum?" L. Pillion, "La légende de s. Jérôme d'après quelques peintures italiennes du XVe siècle au Musée du Louvre," Gazette des Beaux-Arts 39 (1980): 302 n. 2; Henri I. Marrou, "Saint Augustin et l'ange, une legend Médiévale," in L'homme devant Dieu: Mélanges offerts au P. de Lubac, vol. 2 (Paris: Aubier, 1964), 137-49. Illustrations of the story begin to appear on panels or in Books of Hours at the end of the fourteenth century. It was first included in a life cycle of Saint Augustine by Benozzo Gozzoli, in his 1460 fresco cycle for the Church of Sant'Agostino in San Gimignano. Diane Cole Ahl, "Benozzo Gozzoli: The Life of Saint Augustine in San Gimignano," in Schnaubelt and Van Fleteren, Augustine in Iconography, 367.

We know that, among Augustine's works, the De Trinitate was particularly widely available in libraries throughout the Middle Ages.<sup>962</sup> In fifteenth-century Florence, it counted among the works of the saint that were most frequently quoted and, presumably, the most frequently read.<sup>963</sup> At that time, the Santo Spirito library contained multiple copies of the De Trinitate; extracts from the work were also included in that library's copies of Bartolommeo da Urbino's Milleloquium.<sup>964</sup> Although De Voragine's extremely influential Vita of Augustine does not mention the De Trinitate by name, the author recounts two relevant anecdotes: In the first, a wronged woman who went to seek the counsel of the Bishop of Hippo found the saint engaged in study; despite her pleas, he gave her no response. The following day, when Augustine elevated the host during the celebration of the Mass, the same woman "was rapt in ecstasy ... and saw herself placed before the tribunal of the most holy Trinity. Augustine also was there, standing with bowed head and discoursing most attentively and sublimely about the glory of the Trinity." A heavenly voice then explained to the woman that, at the time she sought Augustine's attention, he was "absorbed in thinking about the glory of the Trinity."<sup>965</sup> Depictions of this tale were included in medieval illustrated cycles of Augustine's life, such as the fifteenth-century Historia Augustini (fig. 167).<sup>966</sup> De Voragine also tells us of

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962. A. Wilmart, "La tradition des grands ouvrages de St. Augustin," Miscellanea Agostiniana, 2 (Rome, 1930): 269ff, cited in Gill, Augustine in the Italian Renaissance, 18.

963. Gill, Augustine in the Italian Renaissance, 23.

964. David Gutierrez, "La biblioteca di Santo Spirito in Firenze nella metà del secolo XV," Analecta Augustiniana 25 (1962): 5-88.

965. De Voragine, Golden Legend, 2, 124. The writer assures us, however, that when the woman returned, Augustine "heard her kindly and gave her wise counsel."

966. Beginning in the late fifteenth century, the episode appears to have been replaced by the story of Augustine and the Child by the sea. Jeanne Courcelle and Pierre Courcelle, Iconographie de Saint Augustin: Les cycles du XVe siècle (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1969), 60.

a holy man who, finding himself looking at the saints in glory, asks where is Augustine. He is told, “Augustine resides in the highest heaven, and there expatiates on the glory of the most excellent Trinity.”<sup>967</sup> What is communicated through the ecstatic visions of De Voragine’s witnesses is the authority of Augustine’s Trinitarian discourse. This reverence for the intellectual substance and the expressive character of the saint’s words as they are addressed to the issue of the Trinity is evident in the self-identification and self-imaging of the Augustinian Hermits. Thus, Ambrogio Lorenzetti’s 1335–37 Maestà in Massa Maritima foregrounds the figure of Faith, who gestures towards her mirror on which appears an image of the Trinity (fig. 168).<sup>968</sup> The allegory clearly refers to the words of Saint Paul—“for now we see through a glass darkly but then face to face (1 Cor.: 12–13). In addition, Diana Norman has linked the image to a concluding passage in the De Trinitate, in which Augustine advises us to follow Paul, cultivating our faith by “looking at the glory of the Lord through a mirror.”<sup>969</sup> A very different altarpiece painted almost two centuries later, Andrea del Sarto’s ill-named 1517 Dispute over the Trinity (fig. 169), commissioned for the Augustinian Hermit convent of San Gallo outside Florence, shows Augustine vigorously lecturing five attentive fellow saints—rather as De Voragine might have imagined him. Above, the Throne of Grace, lacking the dove of the Holy Spirit, floats in a dark storm cloud that rages above a mountaintop. Here again, these details refer us to a specific passage in the De Trinitate, in which Augustine

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967. De Voragine, Golden Legend, 2, 124.

968. The mirror was originally covered in silver leaf and included the dove of the Holy Spirit; the silver leaf has oxidized leaving only the red base and the dove is only faintly visible. Norman, Siena and the Virgin, 124.

969. Augustine, The Trinity, XV, 20, 411.

reminds the reader that, in the book of Exodus, God took on the form of a storm above Mount Sinai. He goes on to opine that it was specifically the Holy Spirit who appeared in this manifestation.<sup>970</sup>

These examples suggest that, as a substantive text, the De Trinitate was very much a live matter to the Augustinian friars from the Middle Ages through the Renaissance. In turn, the saint's writing of the De Trinitate, his journey into the central Christian mystery, takes on the character of a consecrated undertaking, unique to Augustine, and enveloped in its own air of mystery. While saints in fifteenth-century Tuscan painting are often displayed holding and reading books, Augustine, in particular, is frequently shown writing, as, for instance, in two Botticelli altarpieces, the 1487 Saint Barnabas altarpiece, painted for the church of the Augustinian Canons in Florence,<sup>971</sup> and the 1490–93 Coronation of the Virgin with Saints John the Evangelist, Augustine, Jerome and Eligius commissioned for the chapel of Saint Eligius at San Marco.<sup>972</sup>

The numerous quattrocento and cinquecento representations of the legend of Augustine and the Christ Child, described above, also testify to the pervasive characterization of the saint as the author of the De Trinitate. It appears, for instance, in Botticelli's predella for his 1487 Saint Barnabas altarpiece and in the predella panel below the figure of Augustine in Pinturicchio's 1496–98 Santa Maria dei Fossi Altarpiece, executed for the main altar of the church of the Augustinian Canons in

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970. Ibid., II, 25, 26.

971. Lightbown, Botticelli, 189, pl. 62.

972. Ibid., 199, pl. 69.

Perugia (fig. 170).<sup>973</sup> In fact, one convent of Augustinian Hermits, the Eremo della Santa Trinita de Centumcellis, attempted to localize and thus to assert ownership of the legend.<sup>974</sup> By the mid-twelfth century, the existence of a religious community of hermits is documented in the heavily forested hills of Allumiere near the sea town of Civitavecchia (the Roman Centumcellis). The convent, which joined the order of the Augustinian Hermits at its inception in 1256, had long claimed that Saint Augustine had lived in their community. This sojourn would have taken place before the saint's return to Africa from Milan, and thus during that period of his life when, according to the *vitae* promoted by the Augustinian Hermits, he had established his first monastic community on Monte Pisano.<sup>975</sup> Local legend affirmed that it is during his stay at Centumcellis that Augustine began to write his De Trinitate. He was in the habit of meditating on his subject while walking through a subterranean passageway that led, over many kilometers, to the beach. It is on that beach, the friars of Santa Trinita asserted, that Augustine famously encountered the Child who belittled his efforts at investigating the Trinity.<sup>976</sup>

Yet, on its face, the legend of Augustine and the Child, a story that flatly asserts the impossibility of comprehending, let alone writing about the Trinity, is a surprising pictorial summation of a centuries-long tradition of veneration of the De Trinitate and its author. By means of the wordless pantomime of the spoon, the Child tells Augustine that

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973. In Michael Pacher's 1483 Altarpiece of the Church Fathers painted for the Monastery of Neustift in 1483, each saint is represented with the dove of the Holy Spirit and one attribute; Augustine is shown contemplating the child and his spoon,

974. Ennio Brunori, "L'Eremo della Trinita 'de Centumcellis'" in Schnaubelt and Van Fleteren, Augustine in Iconography, 223–68.

975. Supra, chap. 3.

976. Not surprisingly, the Augustinian Hermits supported at least some of these claims. In 1475, Ambrogio da Cori, prior general of the order, asserted that Augustine had delivered a second copy of his rule to the monks in Centumcellis and had erected a convent in that place. Brunori, "L'Eremo," 227.

his attempt to encompass and grasp the Trinity with words—words thought and then written—is fruitless. The saint’s famous text is simultaneously celebrated and negated. This apparent contradiction raises again the issues of ambivalence, hesitation and negativity as they affect the writing or imaging of the Trinity.

The recognition that God evades the language that would describe him is a theme that runs through the De Trinitate. At times, this takes the form of qualifications that function as a form of rhetorical hesitation. Thus, Augustine’s reference to the manifestation of the Holy Spirit as a storm cloud over Sinai—precisely the passage of the De Trinitate illustrated in Del Sarto’s San Gallo altarpiece (fig. 169) is preceded by a lengthy caveat: “However, if one may be permitted a modest and hesitant conjecture, without asserting anything rashly, if one of the persons of the three can be discerned in these manifestations, why should we not give preference to the Holy Spirit.”<sup>977</sup> Elsewhere, Augustine speaks directly about the inadequacy of language. He notes, for example, in the prologue to Book II: “People who seek God, and stretch their minds as far as human weakness is able toward an understanding of the trinity, must surely experience the strain of trying to fix their gaze on ‘light inaccessible.’”<sup>978</sup> As he strives conceptually towards the Trinity, Augustine is aware of the strain. Discussing the use of the Greek terms for “substance” and “person” in describing the Trinity, he notes: “Yet when you ask ‘Three what?’ human speech labors under a great dearth of words. So we

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977. Augustine, The Trinity, II, 26.

978. Ibid., II, prologue, 97. The De Trinitate is not, of course, the only work in which Augustine touches on the theme of language’s inadequacy in conjuring with the Divine. In the De Doctrina Christiana (1, 6, 108), he asks, “Have I said anything that is worthy of God? On the contrary, all I feel I have done is wish to say something; but if I have said anything, it is not what I wished to say. How do I know this? I know it because God is inexpressible; and if what has been said by me were inexpressible, it would not have been said. And from this it follows that God is not to be called inexpressible, because when even this is said about him, something is being expressed.”



say three persons not in order to say that precisely, but in order not to be reduced to silence.”<sup>979</sup> Time and again, his language gives in to light imagery taken from the language of scripture, imagery which functions as a conclusion to and a substitute for the unfolding of thought. In relation to the Father the Son is “like light flowing from light” because Wisdom is the “brightness of eternal light (Wis. 7:26).”<sup>980</sup> And again, “So the Father is light, the son is light, the Holy Spirit is light; but together they are not three lights but one light.”<sup>981</sup> Most frequently cited, perhaps, is 1 Timothy 6:16: “God dwells in ‘light inaccessible,’”<sup>982</sup> a term that serves Augustine as a metaphor for the Trinity and for the Trinity’s unavailability to human expression.

One way to understand Augustine’s attitude toward his own text is as an implicit acknowledgment of the role of negativity in the human apprehension of the divine, or, in other words, as an argument for an apophatic approach to Christian Truth: The Trinity—the true nature of God—is precisely that which cannot be grasped through the words that give shape to rational thought. Faced with the inherent human ignorance of God, efforts at speech unravel; by necessity, they unsay themselves. Both McGinn and Denys Turner, in discussing the fundamentals of Christian mysticism, note the notion of God as absence as an important current running through Christian mystical thought, including that of Augustine.<sup>983</sup> At the same time, Augustine’s prolix efforts to do precisely what he cannot

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979. Augustine, *The Trinity*, V, 10, 196.

980. Ibid., IV, 27, 172.

981. Ibid., VII, 6, 224.

982. Ibid., I, 2, 66; I, 10, 71; II, 1, 97; II, 15, 107; II, 32, 120; II, 33, 120; II, 34, 121.

983. Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 6; McGinn, *Foundations of Mysticism*, xix. The apophatic tradition is ordinarily associated with the work of Pseudo-Dionysius, described by Turner as probably “a Greek speaking Syrian

do—describe God—suggest that Turner is justified in describing the saint as a cataphonic writer, one who deploys “all the resources of language in the effort to express something about God.”<sup>984</sup> It is precisely in the failure of this strenuous overwriting that the inadequacy of language to encompass and even to reach God becomes evident.

## 2. Seeing the Trinity

For Augustine, the failure of language to grasp the Trinity is the linguistic correlative of man’s inability to perceive the Trinity. In the De Trinitate itself, Augustine explicitly and repeatedly rejected the possibility of seeing the Trinity “face to face” in this lifetime. This point is, in fact, the principal argument of Book 1. Here again, he turns to 1 Timothy 6:14–16, in which God is defined as the “Lord of lords, who alone has immortality and dwells in light inaccessible, whom no man has ever seen or can see.”<sup>985</sup> Later, he affirms categorically, “Now divinity cannot be seen by human sight in any way whatsoever; it is seen by a power of sight which makes those who already see with it not human but superhuman.”<sup>986</sup>

The notion that we cannot see the true face of God, the Trinity, is fundamental to the extended argument of the De Trinitate. Seeing God, for Augustine, is not a momentary ecstatic experience but the Christian analog of the Neoplatonic union with the divine; it is mankind’s supreme happiness, achieved only by the saints in heaven, who

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monk ... writing at the end of the fifth century and the beginning of the sixth” (Darkness of God, 12 n. 1). No accessible Latin translation of his writings was available till the ninth century and his influence, felt primarily between the twelfth and the sixteenth centuries, remained relatively limited to mystical theologians. Turner, Darkness of God, 12–13.

984. Turner, Darkness of God, 34.

985. Augustine, The Trinity, I, 10, 71.

986. Ibid., I, 11, 72. Here again, Augustine’s straining and spiraling turn of phrase calls into question language’s ability to express notions related to the visibility of God.

live with God. One of the key texts here 1 Corinthians 13:12: “We see now through a glass in a puzzle, then it shall be face to face.”<sup>987</sup> The contemplation of God in heaven is the supreme good and the ultimate reward for faith in this life:

Contemplation in fact is the reward of faith, a reward for which hearts are cleansed through faith, as it is written, cleansing their hearts through faith (Acts 15:9). Proof that it is that contemplation for which hearts are cleansed comes from the key text, “Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God (Matthew 5:8).”<sup>988</sup>

Not only may we not see God, but also we cannot imagine him. Augustine defines divinity in highly abstract terms, as Wisdom, Love and Goodness. He is “the selfsame ... that supreme and changeless good which is God, and his wisdom and his will.”<sup>989</sup> Elsewhere, he specifies, “If we try to think of him ... we must not think of any special contact or intertwining as it were of three bodies, any fusion of joints in the manner in which the fables picture the three-bodied Geryon ... Indeed any and every bodily conception is to be so rejected.”<sup>990</sup> In fact, “position, possession, times, and places, they are not stated properly about God but by way of metaphor and simile. Thus he is said to be ‘seated on the cherubim’ (Ps. 80:2), which is said with reference to position.”<sup>991</sup>

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987. Ibid., I, 16, 76. The verse is cited 26 times in the De Trinitate. Augustine draws on Exodus to make a similar point: “The Lord goes on to say to Moses: You cannot see my face and live, for a man shall not see my face and live” (Exod. 33:20); II, 28, 76. As I noted earlier, the 1 Cor.13:12 is relevant to the depiction of Faith in Ambrogio Lorenzetti’s Augustinian Maestà at Massa Maritima.

988. Ibid., 17, 77.

989. Ibid., III, 8, 131.

990. Ibid., VIII, 3, 243. Similarly, in his Epistula 120, Augustine declares that the Trinity is not “like three living masses, even though immense and beautiful, bounded by their proper limits, ... whether with one in the middle,... or in the manner of a triangle with each touching the other.” We must “shake out of our faith” these images. “The Trinity is invisible in such a way that it cannot be seen by the mind.” Cited in McGinn, “Theologians as Trinitarian Iconographers,” 186.

991. Augustine, The Trinity, V, 9, 195.

Augustine encourages us, in other words, to discard all concrete images in thinking about the Godhead. Our pursuit of the Trinity is limited to the intellect.

This attitude is entirely consonant with the theory of vision set forth by Augustine in his De Genesi ad litteram. Taking as an example the commandment to love one's neighbor, Augustine distinguished three forms of the act of seeing: "through the eyes by which the letters [of the commandment] are seen, the second through the spirit of man by which we think of the neighbor, though he is absent, and the third through the intuition of the mind by which Love itself is seen when it is known."<sup>992</sup> "The spirit of man" here is a faculty akin to our imagination — "a certain power of the soul inferior to mind in which there are impressed likenesses of bodily things."<sup>993</sup> In Augustine's analysis, which involves graduating levels of moral and intellectual attainment, the "likenesses of bodily things," by which we might construct an image of the Trinity, are inferior to "the intuition of the mind," which recognizes and dwells among the ideal forms, "the intellectual or intelligible realities where the clear truth is seen without any likeness of the body."<sup>994</sup> As Augustine develops his arguments in the De Trinitate, it becomes evident that neither bodily nor "spiritual" vision leads to a grasp of the divine triad. It is only through a vision of "intellectual and intelligible realities"—most prominently, Truth, Wisdom and Love—that we attain an understanding of God.

As the multiple depictions of Augustine in contemplation of the Trinity testify, the saint's position is at odds with the permissive posture of medieval and Renaissance

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992. Augustine, De Genesi ad litteram, XII, 6, 15, cited in Roland J. Teske, "Saint Augustine and the Vision of God," in Van Fleteren, Schnaubelt, and Reino, Augustine: Mystic and Mystagogue, 293.

993. Ibid.

994. Augustine, De Genesi ad litteram, XII, XXVI, 54, cited in Teske, "Augustine and the Vision of God," 295.

theologians towards the representation of the Deity.<sup>995</sup> We noted earlier, however, an ambivalence about such representations. Interestingly, although De Voragine, in his Vita of Augustine, endeavors to fashion and to celebrate a relationship between the saint and God in the aspect of the Trinity, he refrains from suggesting that the saint himself received a vision of the Trinity in his lifetime. In his vignette of the “wronged woman” in need of Augustine’s counsel, the woman, not Augustine, is granted such a vision. The tale has the character of a negotiated solution, whereby the very insignificance of the anonymous “everywoman” negates the personal significance of her vision, while allowing her to serve as a witness to the profound tenor and holy character of Augustine’s meditations on the Trinity and, by extension, of his writings on the same subject. In one fourteenth-century depiction of the tale, Saint Augustine and Saint Monica before a Vision of the Trinity (fig. 171), a dark-clad woman with a halo, usually identified with Monica, tugs on Augustine’s cope to attract his attention, while he reacts with astonishment to the apparition of the Throne of Grace on an altar. The image replaces Augustine’s meditation upon the Trinity by an actual vision during the celebration of the mass, giving to Augustine the visionary role played by the woman in De Voragine’s tale and thus clarifying the story’s true purpose. The ambiguities here, the need for negotiation in De Voragine’s plotting of the tale—if not in its later illustration—reflects the broader ambiguity that appears to have affected the *visio Dei* throughout the Middle Ages.

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995. Scholars have argued that the younger Augustine did conceive of a vision of the divine in this lifetime, albeit a partial and momentary one or one confined to “some great and incomparable souls.” On the Soul’s Greatness, cited in McGinn, Foundations of Mysticism, 236. In The Confessions, Augustine describes two experiences that involve contact with the divine: an introspective “illumination,” in which he glimpsed an “unchanging Light” that “blazed” into him, and the famous ecstasy at Ostia, in which he, together with his mother Monica, rose from “affective intention,” to use McGinn’s term, to a brief, intense contact with holy Wisdom. Augustine, The Confessions, VII, 10, 16, 172, 173; IX, 24, 227, 228; McGinn, Foundations of Mysticism, 235.

The De Trinitate's rejection of the image, whether actual or imagined, in favor of the mind's apprehension of the *rationes aeternae* necessarily raises issues for the representational arts. We discussed earlier the formal disjunction between the frontal, two-dimensional elements of the Throne of Grace, when included in a three-dimensional setting, its consequent loss of "real presence" and, in some cases, referential power beyond the status of pure image. In light of Augustine's rejection of any imaging of the Trinity, the referential weakness of the Throne of Grace may also be seen as a particular instance of the ambiguity or inadequacy that stalked any attempt to image the Trinity and, even more broadly, of the intellectual and emotional uncertainty that necessarily accompanied a portrayal of the essential Christian mystery. Clearly, the masters of theology at Santo Spirito, a *studio generale* for the Augustinian order with multiple copies of the De Trinitate in its library, would have been entirely aware of Augustine's views on imaging the Trinity. Yet, in that case, what is the purpose and, indeed, the referential status of the Throne of Grace images included in two late quattrocento altarpieces produced for the order, the Botticelli and Del Mazziere Trinities?

In the intellectual and institutional Augustinian context of Santo Spirito, the Throne of Grace cannot purport to portray an actual likeness of the triune God. If that is the case, then the image functions not as a representation but as a pictorial sign, which substitutes for the object without saying anything about that object's appearance. Augustine comes close to identifying such a sign when he describes the reference in Psalm 80:2 to God "seated on the cherubim" as a "metaphor and simile."<sup>996</sup> Unlike the linguistic sign, whose connection to the signified is usually arbitrary, the Throne of Grace is articulated so as to say a great deal about the different persons of the Trinity, their

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996. Augustine, De Trinitate, V, 9, 195.

relationship with each other and the relationship of the Trinity as a whole and its different parts with an attentive humanity. As we have seen, it speaks, in particular, of the Father's propitiation towards mankind through the sacrifice of the Son, a sacrifice accomplished and symbolized by the crucifix that the Father holds up in his hands. In other words, the Throne of Grace is a discursive pictorial sign—an eloquent substitute—that speaks to the beholder about God, but is not an image of God.

### **E. Painting the Trinity**

If it is only with the greatest difficulty that we can speak and write about the Trinity and if we cannot approach it by imagining its physical appearance, how should we, in fact, think about the Trinity, and how can it be rendered in a painted altarpiece? I will propose a number of ways in which Del Mazziere, prompted by his Augustinian advisors, imaged the notion of a divine presence beyond—and as an alternative to—his Throne of Grace. The representations suggested here may be described as apophatic in that they strive to represent God as absence, through the depiction of something that is not God.

As scholars have noted, the subject of the De Trinitate is as much about the process of developing an understanding of the Trinity as it is about the Trinity itself.<sup>997</sup> Moreover, the development of this understanding coincides with the very process of our sanctification, of our becoming closer to and more like God. To some degree, Augustine's theology here is one of continuous meditative praxis; understanding comes to the soul that seeks to transform itself into the reflection of what it wishes to

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997. "Augustine is proposing the quest for, or the exploration of, the mystery of the Trinity as a complete program for the Christian spiritual life, a program of conversion and renewal and discovery of self in God and God in self." Edmund Hill, introduction to The Trinity, 19.

understand.<sup>998</sup> Augustine describes the task of grasping the Trinity as an inward one, a probing consciousness of one's self and of the self's relation to God. This path is necessary because man was created in the image and likeness of God and therefore in the image of the Trinity; "approaching it ... by a certain likeness, as one can talk of a certain proximity between things distant from each other, not proximity of place but of a sort of imitation."<sup>999</sup> If we conduct a radical search for what we are, ridding ourselves of sensory input and the traces of such input in our imagination, we will find our self-consciousness, a faculty that, in Augustine's highly integrated conception of mind, is the interlinked triad of memory, understanding and love of self.<sup>1000</sup> When the mind is able to take God as its object of desire, this tripartite self-consciousness becomes memory, understanding and love of God.<sup>1001</sup> In that condition, self-consciousness is perfected; the mind truly becomes itself and sees itself as what it is, the image of the Trinitarian God. Thus, in order to grasp the notion of the divine Trinity, man must be returned to his true self: understanding is inseparable from the notion of personal renewal.<sup>1002</sup>

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998. Rowan Williams, "De Trinitate," in Fitzgerald, Augustine through the Ages, 848. McGinn, Foundations of Mysticism, 243–48.

999. Augustine, The Trinity, VII, 12, 231.

1000. "The human mind, then, is so constructed that it never does not remember itself, never does not understand itself, never does not love itself." Ibid., XIV, 18, 384. "Since <the mind> was seen always to know itself and always to will itself, it must at the same time be seen always to remember itself and always to understand and love itself." Ibid., X, 19, 299.

1001. "This trinity of the mind is not really the image of God because the mind remembers and understands." Ibid., XIV, 15, 383.

1002. Augustine concludes the De Trinitate with a prayer that includes the line "Let me remember you, let me understand you, let me love you. Increase these things until you refashion me entirely." Ibid., XV, 51, 436.



In the Santo Spirito Trinity, Augustine's profoundly introspective approach to theological truth is reflected in the prominent foregrounding of the relationships between the Trinity and Saints Mary Magdalene and Catherine. They are both shown with bodies converging on the figure of the Crucified Christ, their faces are lifted up toward him, their gaze riveted upon him, conveying the strength of their yearning. This joint attitude reflects the *desiderium*, the "sighing and yearning" for God that is for Augustine the root of the reformed life.<sup>1003</sup> As noted earlier, Agnolo highlighted differences in appearance between his female saints in order to create a pleasing effect of *varietà* and, as well probably, to embody the *vita mixta* of mendicant life. Nonetheless, he placed both saints in similar attitudes so that the intensity of one figure reinforces that of the other. The emotional charge of their joint devotion is further heightened by their close juxtaposition to the figure of Christ. The painting may be read as a development of the ecstatic trinitarian visions of Del Castagno's Paula and Eustachion (fig. 160) and Botticelli's Sant'Elizabetta Magdalene. The Throne of Grace makes its appearance in those works as an intense, astonishing and fugitive sensory apparition, which unfolds here into a protracted and profound inwardly propelled and directed experience. In other words, the Santo Spirito altarpiece, like Augustine's De Trinitate, foregrounds the transformative inner journey in pursuit of the Trinity through Christian praxis, an experience that the beholder in turn will be impelled to follow.

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1003. Ibid., I, 21, 80. The sight of God is "the sight which ravishes every rational soul with desire for it, and of which the soul is the more ardent in its desire the purer it is." Ibid., II, 28, 118. The intensity of this desire is one of the more striking characteristics of the language of the Confessions. McGinn, Foundations of Mysticism, 239.

## 1. Restoring the Image

For Augustine, the project of restoring the image of God in man begins with faith, and specifically love by faith. “From what likeness or comparison of things known to us,” Augustine asks, “[are we] able to believe, so that we may love the as yet unknown God?”<sup>1004</sup> We love by referring to the form or idea of Justice and Truth present in our own minds.<sup>1005</sup> These forms in turn are subsumed within the encompassing form of Love itself, which is God: “For ... ‘God is love,’ (Jn. 4:8) and ‘those who are faithful in love will repose with him’ (Wis. 3:9).”<sup>1006</sup> We noted above the affective character of the saints’ reactions to the Trinity and the foregrounding of Mary Magdalene’s and Catherine’s passionate relationship with Christ. The loving faith required by Augustine is faith in “the temporal and physical reality of the incarnation and in the death and resurrection of Christ.”<sup>1007</sup> Manifesting himself to the apostles, Christ “was offering the flesh which the Word had been made ... as the object to receive our faith.”<sup>1008</sup> Augustine distinguishes between the Word itself, the Truth visible only in eternal life, from the body of Christ in which we have faith today: “While we are away from the Lord and walking by faith and not by sight (2 Cor. 5:6), we have to behold Christ’s ... flesh, by this same faith.”<sup>1009</sup>

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1004. Augustine, The Trinity, VIII, 8, 248.

1005. Ibid., IX, 12, 277; VIII, 9, 251.

1006. Ibid., VIII, 12, 253.

1007. “As regards this flesh of his, it is faith in its resurrection that saves and justifies.” Ibid., II, 29, 118; Hill, introduction to Book IV, The Trinity, 150.

1008. Ibid., IV, 26, 172.

1009. Ibid., II, 28, 118. Christ’s response to Philip in John 14:8–11 receives a similar reading. Philip asks, “‘Lord, show us the Father and, it is enough for us.’ Jesus saith to him: ‘... Philip, he that seeth me

In both Botticelli's Pala delle Convertite (fig. 145) and the Santo Spirito Trinity, the object of the saints' gaze reflects Augustine's distinction between the *visio Dei* in heaven and the loving faith that characterizes our present state (1 Cor. 13:12). Infrared photography has shown that, in addition to the changes mentioned so far, originally the head of Botticelli's Mary Magdalene was tilted farther back. It seems likely that in her original position, the Magdalene's gaze appeared to encompass the Throne of Grace as a whole. Now that her head has been lowered, she is clearly gazing only at Christ. The same might be said for the Baptist, who points not up at the Trinity, but at the body of Christ. In the Del Mazziere Trinity, the gaze of both saints reproduces faithfully the restricted viewing of Botticelli's Magdalene, as if they were unable to see God the Father or the Holy Ghost. They fix their eyes on Christ through whom, in this life, our soul is made capable of faith.

Clearly, the limitations that apply to Mary Magdalene and Catherine apply all the more to the painting's beholder. The Baptist in Botticelli's Trinity explicitly encourages the beholder to look upon the body of Christ, a prompt that, in Del Mazziere's altarpiece, is implicit in the modeled behavior enacted by the two female saints. We noted several times the prominent foregrounding of Christ's body, which hangs out as if into the viewer's space. The beholder, as well, is encouraged to embrace the figure of the Crucified, who leans out toward him or her, knowing that it is through Christ and, in particular, through Christ's passion that we can participate in the Trinity in this lifetime.

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seeth the Father also.' ... He could be seen 'as made and sent,' but not yet 'as the one through whom all things were made.'" Augustine adds here, "He (Christ) wanted him (Philip) to live by faith before he could see that." Ibid., IV, 26, 172; I, 17, 77.

The effect of faith, ultimately, is to purify the soul, so that it may contemplate God. This applies to the contemplation “face to face” in the afterlife: “Contemplation in fact is the reward of faith, a reward for which hearts are cleansed through faith, as it is written, ‘cleansing their hearts through faith (Acts 15:9).’”<sup>1010</sup> The purifying effects of faith also apply to the intellectual apprehension of God permitted in this life:

What does knowing God mean but beholding him and firmly grasping him with the mind? For he is not a body to be examined with the eyes in your head ... But then to behold and grasp God as he can be beheld and grasped is only permitted to the pure in heart—‘Blessed are the pure of heart for they shall see God (Mt. 5:8)’—so before we are capable of doing this we must first love by faith, or it will be impossible for our hearts to be purified and become fit and worthy to see him.<sup>1011</sup>

What faith accomplishes is to lead the mind away from “the material things of the flesh,” permitting it to rise to “the things of the spirit.”<sup>1012</sup> To understand, for example, the mystery of the Incarnation of the Word, Augustine advises, “You must purify your mind with faith, by abstaining more and more from sin, and by doing good, and by praying with the sighs of holy desire that God will help you to make progress in understanding and loving.”<sup>1013</sup>

The progression described here is a spiritual ascent that requires the rejection of the world and that complements the inward journey in search of the image of God. As we have seen, in his De Quantitate Animae, Augustine, at his most Neoplatonic, described the progress of the soul in upward stages toward wisdom.<sup>1014</sup> At the fourth

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1010. Augustine, The Trinity, I, 17, 77.

1011. Ibid., VIII, 6, 246.

1012. Ibid., II, 28, 118.

1013. Ibid., IV, 31, 176.

1014. Augustine, De Quantitate Animae, 33, 70–76.

stage, “goodness begins” and the soul is engaged “in the difficult task of its own purgation.” Impelled by the desire for God, but also by the fear of death, the soul learns to put the spiritual above the corporeal and “to die to this world.”<sup>1015</sup> In several works, Augustine applied the notion of spiritual development to the gifts of the Holy Spirit enumerated in Isaiah 11:2–3 in conjunction with the beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:3–11).<sup>1016</sup> The eighth beatitude—“Blessed are the clean of heart for they shall see God”—is linked to the gift of understanding; it is the stage at which the soul “purges the eye whereby God can be seen.”<sup>1017</sup> This effort of purification “is effective for cleansing the heart so that we can discern the unchangeable substance of God through pure understanding, insofar as it is allowed in this life.”<sup>1018</sup> This purely intellectual grasp of the Trinity corresponds to Augustine’s third level of vision, above the corporeal and “spiritual.” Indeed, according to Augustine, this is the *visio Dei* that Moses requested of the Lord<sup>1019</sup>—“a vision of him to the extent that the rational and intellectual creature is able to attain it, once it is removed from every sense of the body, from every image of the spirit in signs.”<sup>1020</sup>

Augustine’s rhetoric of purification through faith is targeted not only at the intellectual *visio dei* but also at the spiritual and moral evolution that makes such a vision

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1015. Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, II, 7, 11.

1016. Canisius Van Lierde, “Teaching of St. Augustine,” in Van Fleteren, Schnaubelt, and Reino, *Augustine: Mystic and Mystagogue*, 5–110.

1017. Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*, II, 7, 11.

1018. Augustine, *Epistula 171*, cited in Van Lierde, 54 n. 262.

1019. “If therefore I have found favor in thy sight, shew me thy face, that I may know thee.” Exod. 13:13.

1020. Augustine, *De Genesi ad litteram* XII, 26, 54, cited in Teske, “Saint Augustine and the Vision of God,” 296.

possible. In the De Doctrina Christiana, the saint asserts that the soul's progress involves turning "to love of eternal things, namely to the unchanging unity which is at the same time a trinity."<sup>1021</sup> Achieving both the love of eternal things and the "intellectual" *visio Dei* is itself tied, in the De Trinitate, to the renewal of God's image within the soul, achieved through the strength of one's loving faith and the constancy of one's spiritual and moral efforts. The singular *exempla* of such efforts is of course the penitent Magdalene, as pictured in both the Sant'Elizabetta and the Santo Spirito altarpieces. Within Augustine's framework of the soul's spiritual progress towards the intelligible *visio Dei*, the figure of the Magdalene, imaged as an ascetic and contemplative penitent, refers us to the all-important stage in which, through the abandonment of all earthly concerns and attachments, the heart is purified and the eye cleansed, allowing the Holy Spirit to confer the gift of understanding.

## 2. The Depiction of Light

Describing the soul's spiritual ascent toward the perfected image and the intelligible vision of God, Augustine speaks of light:

Filled now with hope and having all your powers unimpaired, you climb up to the sixth stage, at which you purge and clean these eyes with which God can be seen... And the reason that the beauty of this light is still said to be seen "in a riddle and through a mirror (1 Cor. 13:12)," even though it is already beginning to be manifested to us more surely, already borne more easily and found to be more enjoyable, is that we are walking more by faith than by sight as long as we are on our journey through this life.<sup>1022</sup>

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1021. Augustine, De Doctrina Christiana, II, 7, 11, 133.

1022. Ibid. "Since we are to enjoy to the full that Truth which lives without change... the mind must be cleansed in order that it may be able to look upon that light and cling to it when it has seen it. Augustine, De Ordine, II, 19, 51 cited in Nash, Light of the Mind, 37.

We noted earlier Augustine's consistent use of light metaphors in the De Trinitate. The language of light is surely relevant to the Santo Spirito altarpiece with its powerful and distinctive depiction of light. At its most intense immediately above the landscape's distant horizon line, Agnolo's expanse of light paints with a bright honeyed hue almost the entire stretch of the sky displayed in the panel. The same light flows through the valley landscape and saturates it with gold. The smoky view of the distant mountains and the town is suffused with light, while a river meandering through the valley gleams brightly, reflecting the brightness of the sky. In the foreground, the figures of Christ and the two saints are so strongly lit that the flesh tones of Christ's body and of the creamy faces of Mary Magdalene and Catherine appear radiant as if they themselves were a source of light. Most striking are the body and face of Christ, their sustained and saturated golden hue sculpted with great naturalism by brighter highlights and gray shade.

Clearly, Agnolo intended to describe the naturalistic workings of a particularly intense dawn light emanating from the distant horizon. In order to illuminate the foreground figures as well as the landscape, he introduced light from another source in front of and somewhat to the left of the painting.<sup>1023</sup> The Magdalene, like the cliffs behind her, would be left in shadow if the artist hadn't given her a three-quarter profile pose and slightly tilted her head, so that the lighting from the front of the painting catches her glistening hair and brightens her cheek. The equal intensity and value of the light produced by both the background and foreground light systems has the effect of melding them into one sustained flow. In addition, the intense brightness of this compounded

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1023. As we have seen, the same light source, to the front left of the painting, is at work in Filippino Lippi's Nerli altarpiece.

natural light assimilates it to the intense decorative gilding used to represent the sunrays and clouds of the mandorla, to outline the cherubim's wings and to decorate the garments and halos of the figures. At the same time, the trail of golden clouds, arrayed to form orthogonals leading back to the horizon, connect this glittering mandorla to the light's distant point of origin in the landscape. In temporal and spatial terms, the connection is ambiguous; the flattened tranche of the mandorla, above the arms of the cross, fights our attempt to read the orthogonal clouds as defining a point of origin from which the mandorla would have traveled. As a result, the association between the mandorla with its delicate and elaborate gilding and the rich dawn light remains a matter of decorative surface unity.

Like the blood red cloud-bank in Castagno's Vision of Saint Jerome (fig. 160), the mandorla's trail of clouds does suggest movement. We noted earlier Augustine's repeated use in the De Trinitate of the metaphor of light to describe Christ's emanation from the Father; the Son is sent "because he is 'a certain pure outflow of the glory of almighty God (Wis. 7:25).'"<sup>1024</sup> While Christ's incarnation occurred once in time, Augustine is very clear that the Son's procession from the Father occurs perpetually in a state outside time: God "was offering the flesh which the Word had been made in the fullness of time as the object to receive our faith; but ... the Word itself, 'through whom all things had been made (Jn. 1:3)', was being kept for the contemplation in eternity of minds now purified through faith."<sup>1025</sup>

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1024. "Christ is the power and Wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:24) because he is power and wisdom from the Father who is power and wisdom just as he is light from the Father who is light... So wisdom the Son is from wisdom the Father as light from light and God from God." Augustine, The Trinity, VII, 4, 222, 223.

1025. Ibid., IV, 26, 172. In other words, "for God even being born is everlasting, so that the Son can be coeternal with the father, just as the brightness which a fire begets and radiates is coeval with it, and would be coeternal if fire was eternal." Ibid., VI, 1, 205.



The procession of the Word and the Holy Spirit from the Father, as well as the sacrificial offering of the incarnate Son, was implicit in the composition of the Throne of Grace. However, the Santo Spirito Trinity altarpiece differs from previous representations of the Throne of Grace in its explicit, even elaborate, use of light effects. As we have seen, the gold-tinged body of Christ, in particular, could be described as composed of light. Thus, the panel's prominent light effects, together with the momentum conveyed in Agnolo's panel by the onrushing of dawn and the refulgent immersion of the Throne of Grace in that dawn light, suggest that the Throne of Grace describes here, not only the Eucharistic offering of the Son, but also the everlasting birth of the Word, light from light.<sup>1026</sup>

The pervasive presence of light in the Santo Spirito Trinity, both the decorative light produced by gilding and the depiction of the effects of strong natural light, and the evident participation of Mary Magdalene and Catherine in the reception of that light as it diffuses through the landscape, have further significance. We discussed in an earlier chapter Saint Augustine's theory of divine illumination. Augustine believed that it is through divine intervention in the mind of man that he or she was capable of perceiving moral and intellectual standards and forming true judgments.<sup>1027</sup> God permits the formation of true judgments firstly by establishing in the mind of man eternal standards

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1026. It is not like water flowing out from a hole in the ground ... but like light flowing from light.... 'Wisdom is the brightness of eternal light (Wis 7:26)' and that means surely that it is the light of eternal light. The brightness of light is just light. And therefore it is co-eternal with the light from which it comes as light." Ibid., IV, 27, 172.

1027. Robert E. Lauder, "Augustine: Illumination, Mysticism and Person," in Van Fleteren, Schnaubelt, and Reino, Mystic and Mystagogue, 184. "The mind has," he asserts, "as it were, eyes of its own, analogous to the soul's senses. The certain truths of the sciences are analogous to the objects which the sun's rays make visible, such as the earth and earthly things. And it is God Himself who illumines all." Gerald Bonner, "Augustine and Mysticism," in Van Fleteren, Schnaubelt, and Reino, Mystic and Mystagogue, 113–57, 124.

as predispositions to understanding the truth.<sup>1028</sup> These standards already exist in the mind of God and, in fact, are God, defined as Truth, Goodness and Beauty.<sup>1029</sup> We have cognizance of the forms because God sustains our effort to understand with divine illumination: “The intellectual mind is so formed in its nature as to see these things, which by the disposition of the Creator are subjoined to things intelligible in a natural order, by a sort of incorporeal light of an unique kind.”<sup>1030</sup> Our understanding depends upon the intervention—the illumination—of God.<sup>1031</sup>

Divine illumination manifests to the purified mind the intelligible God.<sup>1032</sup> Mary Magdalene and Catherine, their eyes lovingly fixed on the body of Christ, their faces bathed in the golden light that pours through the painting, contemplate not only the incarnate Christ but the idea of Truth, Goodness and Beauty revealed in their minds by the divine light. What divine illumination also reveals is the image of the Trinity in the interrelationship of memory, intellect and will or love within the illuminated mind. In the epilogue of the De Trinitate, Augustine reminds his reader, “This same light has shown you those three things in yourself in which you can recognize yourself as the image of

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1028. Nash, Light of the Mind, 68.

1029. Ibid., 22.

1030. Augustine, The Trinity, XII, 24, 336.

1031. “God, having so made man, has not left him deistically, to himself, but continually reflects into his soul the contents of His own eternal and immutable mind—which are precisely those eternal and immutable truths which constitute the intelligible world. The soul is therefore in unbroken communion with God, and in the body of intelligible truths reflected into it from God, sees God.” B.V. Warfield, Calvin and Augustine (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1956), 397, cited in Nash, Light of the Mind, 111.

1032. “Since we are meant to enjoy that truth which is unchangeably alive, and since it is in its light that God the Trinity, author and maker of the universe, provides for all the things he has made, our minds have to be purified, to enable them to perceive that light, and to cling to it once perceived.” Augustine, On Christian Teaching, I, 10, 110.

that supreme Trinity on which you are not yet capable of fixing your eyes in contemplation.”<sup>1033</sup> The notion of a spiritual reflection, by which the soul of man mirrors—through the *imago* within the light of God—complements in Augustine’s writing, as in Del Mazziere’s altarpiece, the notion of divine illumination. The moral and spiritual work of purification renews the image of the triune God in which God has rooted man’s soul.

Here again, the penance of the Magdalene epitomizes the cleansing of the *imago* within. Catherine’s virginity, the result of her admirable chastity, has an equal relationship to the notion of the cleanliness of the heart, which leads to understanding and to the radiant perfection of mirroring image, the *imago dei* within. As Peter Brown has noted, “The virgin body was an exquisitely appropriate mirror, in which human beings could catch a glimpse of the immense purity of the *image of God*.”<sup>1034</sup> The renewal of the divine image within and the contemplation of the intelligible Trinity are mutually interdependent and reinforcing. In Del Mazziere’s *Trinity*, the Magdalene and Catherine, their eyes fixed on Christ, both absorb and mirror the divine radiance, just as the glittering river weaving through the panel’s landscape reflects the rising sun.

In the concluding chapters of the *De Trinitate*,<sup>1035</sup> Augustine refers on several occasions to the language of Paul in 2 Corinthians 3:18: “But we with face unveiled,<sup>1036</sup> looking at the glory of the Lord as in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image

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1033. Augustine, *The Trinity*, XV, 50, 435.

1034. Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York, 1988), 299, cited in Lewis, *Cult of St. Katherine*, 83.

1035. Augustine, *The Trinity*, XIV, 23, 390; XV, 14, 406; XV, 20, 411.

1036. The reference is to the Hebrew veil pulled aside by Christ.

from glory to glory as by the Spirit of the Lord.”<sup>1037</sup> We are looking at God through a mirror darkly because we are not yet in Heaven, where we will see him face to face (1 Cor. 13:12). In addition, we gaze at God as in a mirror because we are his image and likeness; through our steadfast gazing, that image is renewed. The verse pulls together multiple themes present in the De Trinitate—the necessity of finding and renewing the image of God within the soul, the need for steady contemplation of the Trinity as intelligible idea, the inadequacy of the earthly *visio Dei*, and the promise of the ultimate renewal of the *imago* in the presence of the Lord.<sup>1038</sup> Mary Magdalene and Catherine, their eyes fixed on Christ, their raised, open faces radiant with the same golden light as Christ’s body, bring Paul’s verse in 2 Corinthians very much to mind. Indeed, De Voragine’s etymology of the Magdalene’s name describes the saint in very similar terms:

Since she chose the best part of inward contemplation, she is called enlightener, because in contemplation she drew draughts of light so deep that in turn she poured out light in abundance... As she chose the best part of heavenly glory, she is called illuminated, because she now is enlightened by the light of perfect knowledge in her mind and will be illumined by the light of glory in her body.<sup>1039</sup>

### 3. The Landscape

The altarpiece’s call to reflect the Lord is expressed not only through the shining faces of the contemplative saints; it is asserted as well in the painting’s shimmering, tree-studded world with its green hills, glittering river and delicate, mist-enveloped city. At the same time, the symmetry of the major landscape elements and the one-point

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1037. The Vulgate *speculantes* is ordinarily translated simply as “gazing” or “contemplating” but it also carries the connotation of reflecting from *speculum*, “mirror.” Augustine clearly intended that the reader keep in mind the reference to a mirror.

1038. It is tempting to believe that one of Santo Spirito’s masters of theology drew this verse to the artist’s attention as a verbal guide to his execution of the panel.

1039. De Voragine, Golden Legend, 1:96.

perspective construction have a stabilizing and ordering effect on the landscape. At the level of the picture plane, the symmetrical cliffs and female figures surrounding the Throne of Grace form a rich, integrated and balanced pattern, ornamented by variety of detail. The created world to which Augustine alludes in the De Trinitate has much in common with Del Mazziere's landscape. The saint's effort to describe an invisible God led him repeatedly to Romans 1:20: "For the invisible things of him, from the creation of the world, are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made."<sup>1040</sup> As a result, the world of being is primarily understood as God's creation, an overwhelmingly positive reflection of divine beneficence. Augustine found further support for this fundamental posture in Wisdom 1:7, "For the Spirit of the Lord hath filled the whole world," and Wisdom 8:1, "[Wisdom] reacheth therefore from end to end mightily, and ordereth all things sweetly."<sup>1041</sup> God fills the world and "the order of nature," which "declares itself in various ways, in all of them ... serves the divine command."<sup>1042</sup> More specifically, Augustine sees the Holy Spirit, understood as the "sweetness" of the tie that binds Father and Son, as an effective agent "pervading all creatures according to their capacity with its vast generosity and fruitfulness, that they might all keep their right order and rest in their right places."<sup>1043</sup> We noted earlier parallels between the understanding of divine *caritas* expressed in Lippi's Nerli altarpiece and views on the same subject held by the preachers at the papal court between the mid-fifteenth and the mid-sixteenth

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1040. Augustine, The Trinity, II, 25, 115; IV, 21, 167; VI, 12, 213; XIII, 24, 363; XV, 1, 395; XV, 3, 396.

1041. Ibid., II, 7, 102; II, 25, 115; II, 30, 118; III, 6, 130; IV, 18, 166.

1042. Ibid., III, 7, 130.

1043. Ibid., VI, 11, 213.

century, as described by O'Malley.<sup>1044</sup> The same parallels can be recognized in the Corbinelli Trinity's portrayal of a landscape bathed in light and the belief expressed by papal preachers in the effects of Providence on the created world.

One way to understand the interrelationship of heaven and earth in the panel is in terms of participation and reflection. Just as Augustine will search for a Trinitarian *imago Dei* in the human mind, he finds reflections of the Trinity in the natural world:

All these things around us that the divine art has made reveal in themselves a certain unity and form and order... So then, as we direct our gaze at the creator by "understanding the things that are made", we should understand him as triad, whose traces appear in creation in a way that is fitting. In that supreme triad is the source of all things, and the most perfect beauty, and wholly blissful delight.<sup>1045</sup>

By unity, form and order and its effects—source, beauty and delight—the universe reflects its creator. In much the same way, for the preachers of the papal *curia* in the late fifteenth century, "all creation somehow reflects the deity. The triplet of measure, number and weight (Wis. 11:21) according to which the universe was created might be seen, for instance, to correspond to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit of the Trinity."<sup>1046</sup> An Augustinian Hermit educated at Santo Spirito, Ambrogio Massari, understood "the harmony of the world as intimating the 'peace' that reigns among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and that binds all grades of creation together."<sup>1047</sup>

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1044. Supra, 284.

1045. Augustine, The Trinity, VI, 12, 213. Augustine may have been encouraged in the unearthing of earthly triads by the scriptural reference: "Thou hast ordered all things in measure, and number, and weight (Wis. 11:21). Robert A. Herrera, "Augustine: Spiritual Centaur?" in Van Fleteren, Schnaubelt, and Reino, Mystic and Mystagogue, 159–76, 170.

1046. O'Malley, Praise and Blame, 130.

1047. Ibid, 132.

Augustine also describes the world in terms of the *Rationes aeternae*, the ideal Forms and patterns that exist in the mind of God: “There is but one Word of God, ‘through which all things were made (Jn. 1:-6),’ which is unchanging truth, in which all things are primordially and unchangingly together.”<sup>1048</sup> To grasp the form of the Good, Augustine asks us to refer to good particulars, such as the earth “with its lofty mountains and its folded hills and its level plains.” Then we are told to remove the particulars and see the good itself. “In this way you will see God ... the good of every good.”<sup>1049</sup> Ultimately, and most importantly for the Santo Spirito altarpiece, Augustine’s trinitarian vision of the world—unity, form and order, and source, beauty, delight—privileges the ordered harmony of the universe, in other words its relationship to God as Beauty.<sup>1050</sup> The beauty of heaven and earth testifies to the beauty of the God who made them.<sup>1051</sup> The sense that the world reflects divine order and harmony was pervasive as well among the preachers at the papal court: “The preachers lived in an ordered, harmonious, stable and beautiful world, a fitting reflection of the divine exemplar.”<sup>1052</sup> This participation of the world in the form of the Beautiful is a notion that the Hermits of Santo Spirito, and indeed Renaissance culture as a whole, would have naturally associated with Augustine, if only on the basis of the extended references in De Voragine’s Vita to the saint’s

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1048. Augustine, The Trinity, IV, 3, 154. “I turned my gaze to other things and saw that they owe their being to you and that all of them are by you defined ... because you hold all things in your Truth as though in your hand.” Augustine, The Confessions, VII, 15, 21, 176; “God is present in the world,” in other words, “as the Truth that regulates all things.” McGinn, Foundations of Mysticism, 234.

1049. Augustine, The Trinity, VIII, 4, 244.

1050. Fleteren and Schnaubelt, “Literary Sources,” 40.

1051. Augustine, The Confessions, IX, 4, 6, 288.

1052. O’Malley, 127.

intimate relation to God in the aspect of Beauty, as expressed in the famous “hymn to Beauty” in The Confessions.<sup>1053</sup>

The landscape of the Santo Spirito Trinity portrays, not only a world that mirrors its creator’s perfection, but also one that manifests the redemptive presence of Christ. I discussed the flowers that surround the Magdalene in terms of the blooming of her barren soul after her penance. Clusters of small white and pink flowers are also scattered among the lush grasses that encircle the Golgotha mound. Some, in fact, spring up from among the bones of Adam (fig. 133). The altarpiece’s ultimate message of hope—specifically, the hope of death transcended—through Christ’s redemptive act, could not be clearer. In the De Trinitate, Augustine discussed the mediation of Christ in terms of harmony restored to the world. He assimilates the death of the “just man,” Christ, for the sake of the sinner to a single matching a double, according to the proportion of one to two, which underlies all musical harmony.<sup>1054</sup> Moreover, the cosmic disharmony brought about by the metaphysical dispersal of the material “many” from the spiritual “one”<sup>1055</sup> is counteracted by the mediation of the “one” in whom all are harmoniously unified and reconciled just as the three persons of the Trinity are harmoniously and perfectly one.<sup>1056</sup>

The Plotinian problem of the one and the many and the aesthetic and Trinitarian dimensions of its resolution were of interest as well to preachers at the papal court: “The

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1053. Augustine, The Confessions, X, 27, 38, 262; De Voragine, Golden Legend, vol. 2, 124.

1054. Augustine, The Trinity, IV, 4, 155; Herrera, “Augustine: Spiritual Centaur?” in Van Fleteren, Schnaubelt, and Reino, Mystic and Mystagogue, 164.

1055. “By wickedness and ungodliness with a crashing discord we had bounced away, and flowed and faded away from the one supreme true God into the many, divided by the many, clinging to the many.” Augustine, The Trinity IV, 11, 161.

1056. Augustine’s articulation of the notion of unlikeness in terms of multiplication and dispersal takes a Plotinian metaphysical issue and resolves it through a Christian metaphysics of mediation. Hill, introduction to Book IV, The Trinity, 149, and notes 9, 177 and 42, 181.



diversity and grades of being in the universe ... [are] coordinated into one harmonious song just as the three Persons are only one God. The Trinity is the final reconciliation of the problem of the one and the many, and the universe reflects that reconciliation.”<sup>1057</sup>

The unifying agency visibly at work within the landscape of the Santo Spirito Trinity is the pervasive rich, honeyed light, which penetrates almost all of pictured creation in its embrace. What we are left with finally is the landscape of Christ’s immanence, saturated by value as it is by light; and here again, the beauty inherent in this vista manifests Christ’s work of redemptive harmony and is integral to that value. In turn, the beauty of Del Mazziere’s carefully calibrated and lavishly crafted painting itself reflects the coincidence of aesthetics and theological truth in the form of Beauty that is also God.

#### **4. Light and Perspective**

Del Mazziere’s landscape is unusual, not only in its pervasive, richly hued light, but also in its careful and sustained one-point perspective, applied to a vast and deeply recessed space (fig. 131).<sup>1058</sup> As we have seen, discreet orthogonals formed by the hem of a section of Catherine’s mantle and the line traced in the Magdalene’s hair as it reaches the ground meet approximately at the center of the horizon, behind the stem of the cross.<sup>1059</sup> At the same time a brilliant array of golden clouds applies to the sky the

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1057. O’Malley mentions specifically the sermons of Cusa and the Dominican humanist Andrea Brenta (132 nn. 22, 25).

1058. Florentine quattrocento art has been enshrined as the progenitor of perspective construction. Recent studies, however, have focused on the variety of these techniques and their limits and their inconsistent applications. Quattrocento paintings composed according to a consistent one-point perspective are rare. James Elkins, Poetics of Perspective; J. V. Field, “Masaccio and Perspective in Italy in the Fifteenth Century,” in The Cambridge Companion to Masaccio, ed. Diane Cole Ahl (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 177–201.

1059. The fact that the orthogonals of Agnolo’s elevated foreground apply to the painting as a whole distinguishes his landscape from that of Piero di Cosimo’s Visitation and suggests, again, that maintaining one-point perspective and a salient vanishing point was crucial to the composition.

receding scheme followed by the landscape. Moreover, symmetrical elements to right and left of the landscape—cliff formations and hills—create a funnel-like effect that emphasizes the orthogonals of earth and sky and accentuates the recession. Ultimately, the panel allies perspective construction and symmetry to create, out of a diversity of cliffs, hills and valley, bushes, trees, glistening rivers and city towers, a stable, a highly ordered and harmonious unity of being of the sort celebrated by Augustine and the papal preachers.

It is important to note that, although a bridge of golden clouds links the Throne of Grace to the horizon, the dawn light, given so much emphasis in the painting, does not emerge from the mandorla of God the Father. Instead, it rises, appropriately in a naturalistic landscape, from the horizon line, whose center is the painting's point of concurrence where the orthogonals of sky and earth converge. Thus, light and perspective not only work together to structure and to color the painting, they are intimately associated and, at the vanishing point, they are one. By definition, the point of the orthogonals' concurrence is necessarily situated at and identified with a locus that is too distant to be visible and which, if one were to advance toward it, would perpetually recede to a distance that made it invisible. Light, as we saw, was widely used by Augustine to refer to the deity, and, as well, to the breakdown of language and the incapacity of vision in the face of divine ineffability and invisibility—"The immortal, invisible, only God ... dwells in light inaccessible (1 Tim. 6:14)."<sup>1060</sup> The Santo Spirito Trinity clearly and vividly identifies the light that illumines the painting with a perspective scheme that necessarily unfolds into invisibility. Thus, the brilliant and

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1060. Augustine, The Trinity, I, 10, 71; II, 14, 107.

saturated light of the panel translates as infinity and invisibility. It is difficult to think of a clearer, more pointed way in which to depict God as an absence whose presence permeates the world and affects all things. Indeed, the panel's composition asserts not only the invisibility of the deity as light, but the substitution on this earth of Christ Crucified. The vanishing point of earth and sky is not only infinitely remote, but also concealed by the trunk of the cross at the level of Christ's ankles. As Christ declares, "He that seeth me, seeth the Father also."<sup>1061</sup> The absent God is invisibly, "darkly," perceived through faith in the historical Christ and in the redemptive workings of his Passion.

### **5. Beholding the Trinity**

Discussing earlier the appeal of the Throne of Grace to its beholders, we noted that it appeared to perform two distinct roles, linked, respectively, to the "economic" and "immanent" perspectives on the Trinity: On the one hand, the image functions as an intimate response to a personal plea, offering the sufferings of all persons of the Trinity as a gage of salvation. On the other, it presents itself as the highest and most profound object of contemplative devotion. I have argued in this chapter that the Santo Spirito Trinity portrays alternative visions of the deity. It also speaks to different audiences, one focused on immediate assurances of salvation, the other intent on self-transformation through meditation and prayer.

We noted earlier that the foreground of the Santo Spirito Trinity speaks directly and forcibly to the beholder (figs. 6 and 133). The large pale skull at the foot of the cross is placed at the immediate foreground, resting almost against the altarpiece frame, its

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1061. John 14:8–11.

dome illuminated by the light that shines from the front left, the black cavities of eyes and nose prominently displayed. This skull and the body of the crucified Christ above it assertively trespass onto the viewer's domain. The blood running from the wounds at Christ's forehead, side and feet is no more than a thin stream, but it glows bright scarlet against the gold flesh. Below Christ's feet, the blood runs down, staining the wood of the cross, to the skull below.

The intrusion of the skull into the beholder's space functions as a reminder of the reality of death at the most personal level. At the same time, the assertion of Christ's presence calls the viewer to counteract the force of death through faith in Christ's redemptive work. Thus, the viewer's first encounter with the altarpiece is an encounter with Christ as personal redeemer and savior. The message is one of hope expressed in Christ's blood streaming down to the skull, in the flowers growing up between Adam's bones and finally in the image of the Throne of Grace itself. That image itself, centered, assertively frontal and pushed up against the picture plane, presents the Father holding up the cross and looking directly at the viewer as he does so. What is stated by the prominent presence of the Father and the Holy Spirit, together with the detailed depiction and foregrounding of the Crucifixion, is the full participation of the divinity in Christ's redemptive act. To the believer, lay or religious, who addressed the painting, the trinitarian figures arrayed above the skull and reaching out almost tangibly into the chapel space delivered a unified and powerful message of personal salvation.

At the same time, the viewer is met with the models of devotion represented by Saints Mary Magdalene and Catherine of Alexandria, themselves located in the immediate foreground of the painting. Their eyes fixed on the figure of Christ, the

Magdalene lyrical in her passionate tenderness, Catherine clear-eyed and resolute, they offer up to the savior lives of penance, martyrdom and perfected contemplative devotion. Their presence sets out for the beholder a model of contemplation that is also a model of an affective, probing, striving belief oriented towards an ever closer relationship with God. The impetus for such a faith, in Augustine's terms, is love, the love demonstrated by God toward men and the responsive love of man for God. What Mary Magdalene and Catherine display is the burning desire for God, which, in Augustine, is a hunger for intellectual illumination in this life and the *visio Dei* in the next. The devotional path they propose for the viewer is that of reformation, the cleansing of the eyes of the heart, so ardently pursued by the Magdalene. The fruit of that effort is the intellectual apprehension of the trinitarian God, the illumination so powerfully portrayed, as the natural light of dawn, in Del Mazziere's painting. In this context, the painting may be described as a call to self-transformation through the renewal of the *imago Dei* within, an effort rewarded by the grace of intellectual vision. The altarpiece's first purpose, to persuade the viewer of the effectiveness of Christ's redemptive mission, was aimed at lay and religious alike. Its second, however, may have been primarily addressed to the friars of Santo Spirito, offering them a catalyst for spiritual *desiderium* and models of contemplative devotion that reflect the aspirations and the thinking of their spiritual father, Augustine.

The Santo Spirito Trinity is imbued with Augustine's own invisible presence in its deployment of rhetorical beauty to build up affective intentionality and to encourage a reformed Christian praxis in the service of a highly intellectual spirituality. In discussing

Masaccio's early fifteenth-century Trinity at Santa Maria Novella, Paolo Giannoni invokes a contextual evolution in Florentine spirituality toward a greater interiority, intensity and immediacy. He describes this current as anti-scholastic, contemplative and Augustinian in its acknowledgment of the believer's subjectivity and in its indebtedness to the spirituality of Marsili's Santo Spirito.<sup>1062</sup> This devotional movement understood the "mystical" life, not as a series of exceptional events, but as "the actualization of the gift of Grace within the concrete boundaries of a given space and time."<sup>1063</sup> Perspective construction, a series of techniques that emerged in the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, depicts objects on a surface plane so as to integrate them with the perceptual schema of a human beholder. That integrated, subjectively oriented presentation provided the viewer with a continuity of visual access that mimicked the beholder's experience of the tangible continuity of the natural world. Perspective construction, furthermore, extended its illusion of continuous access toward a perpetually inaccessible vanishing point, which could represent, for its "outraged" pursuer, the transcendent other, infinity.<sup>1064</sup> As in an "Augustinian" inwardly directed meditation, the viewer pursued contact with the divine through the continuity of subjective experience, into an infinity beyond that experience. To reflect and to stimulate contemplation through the visual idiom of a painting no longer required "giving a realistic background to a symbolic scene

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1062. Paolo Giannoni, "Il movimento spirituale a Firenze nella prima metà del Quattrocento," in Severino and Verdon, La Trinità di Masaccio 33–61. This shift in devotional attitudes is linked to humanism and discussed as "a rhetorical revolt against scholastic theology and philosophy" and "a revival of patristic theological anthropology," particularly the theology of Saint Augustine, by Trinkaus, v.1, xxiii. See also Gill, particularly, "Augustine in the Renaissance," 6–28.

1063. Giannino, "Il movimento spiritual," 51.

1064. Ibid., 54.

such as the Trinity,” but instead, “the insertion of divine being within a frame measured by the human mathematical eye.”<sup>1065</sup>

It is one of the singularities of Del Mazziere’s altarpiece that, in fact, it attempts to do both things. On the one hand, the painting provides a naturalistic background for the symbolic Throne of Grace. We discussed earlier the referential limitations of that image in quattrocento art and its function, in the Santo Spirito Trinity, as an “economic” signifier of divine redemptive power, rather than as a representation of the divinity. At the same time, the painting orchestrates its sweeping vista of land and sky according to a perspective scheme whose vanishing point on the horizon coincides with the trunk of the cross. From the infinity of absence of that vanishing point emerges a dense flood of dawn light, the “immanent” divinity at once concealed and revealed. The absence of God to human sight—despite the redemptive sign of the Throne of Grace—is specifically signified by the presence of “light ineffable,” which, at the same time, portrays the unfolding of God’s grace as illumination, the very illumination that permits the *visio* of the intelligible God. Along the lines suggested by Giannino, the Santo Spirito Trinity attempts to reenact in pictorial terms Augustine’s own affective and intellectual pursuit of the invisible God through the continuous experience of human self-consciousness, and beyond, into the loving embrace of the invisible.

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1065. Ibid., I, 49.

## Conclusion

Prominent among the similarities that link the altarpieces studied in this dissertation is their assertive rhetorical posture, which speaks to the beholder in a pictorial language that is didactic and intellectual, but also, at times, playful and seductive. The four paintings not only facilitate imaginative access to the world they depict, but also encourage the viewer to undertake sustained narrative and thematic readings that eventually reveal the value or constellation of values on which the paintings multiple *invenzioni* are centered. Thus, the *invenzione* of the Bardi altarpiece may be described as the imaginative journey of the viewer who crosses into Botticelli's garden of plenitude to be nourished by the milk of divine Wisdom from the full breasts of the Christ Child, only to be told by Christ's gesture that he must drink from the proffered breast of the Virgin-Ecclesia. At the same time, the Bardi altarpiece may be described as a threefold portrayal of Wisdom: as the garden setting constructed out of the wisdom plants of Ecclesiasticus 24; as the Virgin immaculate, who is the wisdom created by God before all things according to Ecclesiasticus 24; and as Christ, offering his Word to humanity through the Church. The Capponi Visitation displays the joined hands of Elizabeth and Mary, a gesture that accomplished, under the agency of the Holy Spirit, the unity of the Church. The altarpiece thus presents us with several interpretations of the Visitation: as the literal event described in Luke's Gospel; as a moral paradigm that rewards individual goodness with divine visitation; as an allegory of the fusion of the Testaments and the unity of Ecclesia; and as the antitype and fulfillment of the kiss of Justice and Peace promised in Psalm 84. The Nerli altarpiece encourages the viewer to reenact the legend



of Saint Martin's charity within the context of Augustine's City of Man, and, at the same time, describes the pilgrimage of the blessed through the City of Man in terms of Saint Martin's charity. Filippino's painting thus offers the viewer multiple portrayals of charity: as Christ's sacrifice for mankind; as Saint Martin's gift to the beggar; and as Tanai de Nerli's relationship with his wife and family. Finally, the Corbinelli Trinity altarpiece describes divergent but complementary notions of the *visio Dei*: in the intercessory Throne of Grace; the interior quest of the contemplating saints; and the portrayal of light emanating from a point of infinite distance, at once absent and immanent.

The compositions of the four paintings broadly depend upon the underlying convention of the quattrocento *sacra conversazione*. At the same time, an interpretive reading of these works hinges upon the viewer's attention to salient features that depart from those compositional conventions. In the Bardi altarpiece, for example, inscribed banderoles are –unusually-- attached to the plants of the altarpiece's garden setting. As in the case of Botticelli's banderoles, the visual cues present in these four altarpieces are pictorially and narratively integrated into the works' naturalistically rendered *istorie*. As a result, contemporary viewers have sometimes misread them or, quite simply, not read them at all. In Piero di Cosimo's Visitation, we are directed by multiple clues to the handclasp of Mary and Elizabeth; nevertheless, this motif's significance, beyond its reference to the literal event of Mary and Elizabeth's meeting, has been overlooked. The most important interpretive keys of Filippino Lippi's Nerli altarpiece, the massive background gate and the road leading out of the city, have been incorrectly grounded in

an illusory Florentine specificity. The brilliant and highly unusual dawn light rising from the horizon of the Corbinelli Trinity has entirely escaped comment.<sup>1066</sup>

The use of naturalistic, highly integrated symbolic cues in these paintings raises issues relevant to Panofsky's notion of "disguised symbolism." Criticisms of Panofsky's method have frequently centered on the intellectual efforts of scholars to find textual evidence of iconographic intent. Such an effort, it is believed, reduces the role of the beholder to that of a solver of puzzles for whom the aesthetic, affective and more broadly intellectual relationships between painting and viewer become irrelevant.<sup>1067</sup> However, as I have attempted to show in this study, the purely intellectual interpretation of symbolic clues hardly defines the character of the viewer's experience when faced with the four altarpieces discussed here.

"A picture," Saint Bonaventure wrote, "instructs, arouses pious emotions and awakens memories." This understanding of the purposes of religious art is linked specifically by Panofsky to a non-naturalistic medieval tradition that had no need to "disguise" its religious symbolism.<sup>1068</sup> Bonaventure's guidelines, however, are entirely compatible with the likely experience of a fifteenth-century Augustinian friar gazing upon the four altarpieces in the tribune of Santo Spirito. Grounded in a tradition of

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1066. Among these interpretive cues, the breasts of the Christ Child featured in Botticelli's Bardi altarpiece are unique in representing a violation of naturalistic narrative decorum. In order to minimize this effect, Botticelli concealed almost the entire area of the Child's breasts under his raised arm. As a result, these breasts are also routinely "unseen" by the modern viewer.

1067. James H. Marrow, "Symbol and Meaning in Northern European Art of the Late Middle Ages and the Early Renaissance," Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art 16 (1986): 150-169; Michael Ann Holly, Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), 159-162.

1068. Religious images must "propter simplicium ruditatem, propter affectuum tarditatem, propter memoriae labilitatem." Bonaventure, Liber Sententiarum, III, dist. 9, art.1, qu. 2, cited in Panofsky, Early Netherlandish Painting, 141 and 414, n. 1.

memorization inherited from monasticism, such a beholder would draw from the texts, narrated accounts and images stored in his memory the narrative and thematic contexts necessary for an interpretive reading of the visual keys displayed in the four altarpieces. For an Augustinian Hermit beholder in an Augustinian convent, these contexts would have necessarily included the principal works of Augustine, most importantly, the Confessions, the Expositions of the Psalms, the City of God, and the De Trinitate.

For instance, the friars of Santo Spirito would have recognized the motif of Christ as nurturing mother in the Bardi altarpiece, not only from Augustine's Confessions, but also from widely read devotional authors such as Saint Bernard and Saint Catherine of Siena.<sup>1069</sup> The geography of Saint Martin's charity displayed in the Nerli altarpiece would have been familiar to both lay and religious Florentines. Indeed, the inclusion of the Nerli page within the family vignette at the center of the panel would have referred the viewer directly to one of the best-known Florentine examples of Saint Martin's charity--the altar-wall fresco in the oratory of the Buonomini, which uniquely includes the figure of Saint Martin's page. In turn, the desert landscape of the Capponi Visitation would have reminded its religious viewers of the lives of the early Christian hermits in Egypt, including that of Anthony Abbot, and of the language of the Psalms with its multiple references to the barren land watered by God. Reference to divine agency in terms of light, present in the Capponi Visitation and in the Corbinelli Trinity, would also have been familiar to the friars from its repeated use by Augustine. In addition, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, widely received and accepted notions,

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1069. Supra, ns. 309, 310.

based on the medieval science of optics, of the fundamental role of light in God's creation encouraged the metaphorical equation of light with God's Grace.<sup>1070</sup>

Evidently, not all members of the conventual community would have been equally capable of remembering the context of the altarpieces' key images. The presence at Santo Spirito of an important *studio generale*, in addition to the more common *studio provinciale*, tells us that the convent sheltered an unusually large number of younger friars who were studying or preparing to study for academic degrees in philosophy and theology. For these viewers, who may well have been introduced to the altarpieces under the guidance of an instructor, the paintings would have served as vehicles of instruction, as suggested by Bonaventure. They would have expanded and enhanced the students' store of memories of the lives of Christ, his mother and the saints. In addition, the altarpieces would have enriched in vivid pictorial terms the young friars' understanding of essential Augustinian values, such as Charity and Wisdom, and of fundamental Augustinian structures of thought--the Christian life as a pilgrimage within and out of the City of Man, the role of faith, love and purity of spirit within a Christian's ascending path of spiritual progress. The Capponi Visitation, in particular, would have pointedly conveyed to the convent's students the political and institutional traditions on which the order was founded—respectively, papal and ecclesiastical loyalty and eremiticism-- and highlighted the core imperatives of the Augustinian observance-- the crucial roles of humility and obedience within a praxis dominated by study and prayer. As a medium of educational rhetoric, the image has precisely the advantage indicated by Bonaventure's

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1070. The linkage between light and divine Grace was, for instance, described at length by San Antonino in his *Summa Theologica*. Samuel Y. Edgerton, *The Mirror, the Window and the Telescope: How Renaissance Linear Perspective Changed our Vision of the Universe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), 21-38.

description; while it delivers information, it also “rouses pious emotions.” The emotive currents that spiral through and among the figures of Filippino’s Nerli altarpiece, from the carvings on the Virgin’s throne to the Christ Child’s sacrificial gesture, speak of charity while they elicit charitable feeling. New understanding and responsive affect merge in a movement of the spirit that is entirely at odds with the narrowly intellectual detective work often associated with “disguised symbolism”.

In broader terms, what Santo Spirito’s students would have learned from the four altarpieces was how to respond to religious imagery with a highly focused eye. Their minds would have been open, I argue, to remembered narrative and conceptual associations, alongside a sensitivity to affective impact. In other words, the younger friars would have learned techniques of contemplative meditation based on the study of religious images. The panels thus appear particularly well-designed to serve the needs of an emerging academic and spiritual elite within an Augustinian conventual context. While I cannot state with certainty that such a purpose was determinative in the creation of Santo Spirito’s altarpiece program, the presence of a prestigious *studio generale* within the convent does suggest that these altarpieces played a role as complementary vehicles of instruction in the context of the curricula of the *studio*.

In addition, certain altarpieces painted for Santo Spirito in the early 1500s provide evidence that the friars were well aware of the distinctive compositional and discursive character of certain of their church’s quattrocento altarpieces. They hoped, then, to perpetuate what they saw as an effective signature style. In 1505, Raffaellino del Garbo painted his Virgin and Child Enthroned with Saints Lawrence, John the Evangelist, Stephen and Bernard (fig. 19) for the Segni chapel in the left transept of the church. One

singular aspect of the panel is the identical features and vestments of Saints Lawrence and Stephen, who, as deacons and Early Christian martyrs, are frequently portrayed together as youths. In the Segni altarpiece, however, they also wear the same vestments and appear virtually indistinguishable apart from the instruments of their respective martyrdoms. Del Garbo is performing here a gesture of obeisance to the model of the Santo Spirito *conversazione*, exemplified by Rosselli's 1482 Madonna and Saints. As we noted, one of the most pervasive and enduring features of that compositional format is the limitation of the number of saints to two. In this case, the identical young deacons seated to either side of the Virgin's throne take on the role of Rosselli's two angels, thus reducing the number of saints once again to two foreground figures. The angelic role played by the deacons clarifies Del Garbo's intent, which was to assimilate the traditions of the Santo Spirito *conversazione* with developing High Renaissance conventions of dramatic display and full-bodied volume.

Del Garbo's Segni altarpiece alludes moreover to the complex theological iconographies presented in the church's late fifteenth-century altarpieces. Seated on a low bench in the immediate foreground, in a manner that recalls the saints of the Capponi Visitation, John the Evangelist, on the Virgin's left, and Bernard, to her right, hold open books whose contents may be clearly read. John's book, prominently displayed like that of Nicholas of Bari in the Visitation, is inscribed with the opening verse of his Gospel, a text dear to Augustine: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."<sup>1071</sup> Accordingly, the Christ Child on Mary's lap is displayed as the

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1072. Similarly, in Ambrogio Lorenzetti's Maestà for the high altar of the Augustinian Hermit church of Sant'Agostino in Massa Marittima, Saint John the Evangelist holds a pen and an open book inscribed with the letter "I," which refers to the first verse of his Gospel, "In principio erat verbum." As Diana

Word: his creamy skin is of the same hue as the open pages of John's book and his legs are positioned along the oblique lines formed by the book's edges. Signaling his own identity, as formulated in John's text, the Child points upward toward God. Bernard's book, which is inscribed with a quotation from one his writings, adds a Marian reference to this incarnational theme.<sup>1072</sup> In translating text into image and image into text, the Segni altarpiece replicates one of the more prominent rhetorical devices employed in the Santo Spirito altarpieces that we have examined. Del Garbo thus reproduced and honored an altarpiece type that is highly symmetrical in its composition, assertive in its rhetorical posture and rich in its iconography. This gesture, most likely suggested by the Santo Spirito friars, indicates that they were well aware that they had fostered such an altarpiece type, and that, in so doing, they had contributed to the intellectual, religious and artistic prestige of the church and convent.

Del Garbo's quotations from prior Santo Spirito altarpieces have led me to question Burke's assertion that both the Segni altarpiece and Raphael's 1508 Madonna del Baldacchino (the Dei altarpiece, fig. 141) represent a radical shift in chapel décor. Burke read Raphael's inclusion of the chapel's architecture within the Dei altarpiece and the vivid interaction of his figures with the beholder as "a continuation of a reality in which the viewer becomes a participant."<sup>1073</sup> Yet, precisely that notion of continuous spatial reality linking chapel and painting underlies Botticelli's Bardi altarpiece, in which Christ himself, like Raphael's Augustine, welcomes the beholder to a paradise inscribed within the church of Santo Spirito. Indeed, the presence in the Dei altarpiece of a

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Norman notes, the nature of the Logos as described in the first verse of the Gospel of John was of particular interest to Augustine. Norman, Siena and the Virgin, 125.

1072. Capretti, "La pinacoteca sacra," 285.

1073. Burke, Changing Patrons, 80–82

meditative Anthony Abbot, as well as of a welcoming Augustine, refers us to the Capponi altarpiece, the legendary origins of the order of Hermits, the arduous praxis of the *vita mixta* and the very real immediacy to the Augustinian friars of their competing ideals of Wisdom and Love.<sup>1074</sup>

The dense and elaborate iconographic arguments delivered by the four altarpieces that are the subject of this dissertation suggest that, to some degree at least, these *invenzioni* may have been the product of a collective endeavor involving the contributions of several of Santo Spirito's theologians. At the same time, it seems probable that the program as a whole was animated by one energetic guiding spirit. The most likely candidate for this role is the master of theology, Niccolò Bicchiellini, "sacrae paginae professor," procurator of the convent at the time Botticelli executed his Bardi altarpiece and prior through the 1490s and 1500s until his death in 1518.<sup>1075</sup> Bicchiellini's repeated election as prior testifies to his managerial abilities, his popularity among his fellow Hermits and the tangible influence he was able to exert over institutions and individuals outside the convent. As noted above, he was identified by Frey as the prior who helped Michelangelo engage in anatomical dissections and the figure for whom the sculptor made a wooden crucifix.<sup>1076</sup> Michelangelo's gift to Bicchiellini suggests that the artist was persuaded of the prior's ability to appreciate its worth. By 1513, Bicchiellini had himself acquired a chapel on the right-hand side of Santo Spirito's nave.

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1074. Gill, Augustine in the Italian Renaissance, 142.

1075. Capretti proposed that Mariano da Genazzano may have been responsible for the iconography of the Capponi Visitation. Capretti, "Antefatti della Controriforma," 50. As we noted earlier, however, there appears to be no documentary evidence of Mariano's involvement with Santo Spirito. During the early 1490s, in any case, the famous preacher would have been more concerned with the decoration of the observant convent of San Gallo outside Florence, built for him by Lorenzo de' Medici. By the mid-1490s, he appears to have left Florence for Rome. Supra, 42.

1076. Supra, 36 and n. 94.



He decorated it with a sculpted altar loosely based on Sansovino's communion chapel décor and bearing a painted wooden statue of the prior's namesake, Saint Nicholas of Tolentino.<sup>1077</sup> Bicchiellini's interest in acquiring and decorating his own chapel at Santo Spirito further supports the view that he was actively involved in the commission and execution of the altarpieces in the church tribune.

The four altarpieces I have discussed in this dissertation argue for the active influence within the convent of Santo Spirito of a sensibility, both learned and wordly, attuned not only to the theology of Augustine but also to the need for artful persuasion, as urged by the saint himself in his De Doctrina Christiana.<sup>1078</sup> In the 1460s, a rather similar agenda animated the Augustinian Hermits at Sant'Agostino in San Gimignano, where Benozzo Gozzoli's fresco cycle of the life of Augustine stresses the saint's early role as student and teacher and invests his later monastic persona with gravitas and authority.<sup>1079</sup> At Santo Spirito, the Capponi Visitation, in particular, builds upon such institutional references. It foregrounds with painstaking naturalism the figures of Nicholas of Bari and Anthony Abbot studiously reading and carefully writing. Saint Anthony, dressed in the Augustinian habit and Augustine's Episcopal cloak, summarizes in compact form the eremitical origins of the Augustinian order and the core monastic ideal of humility, while the altarpiece's broader iconographic argument asserts the Augustinians' loyalty to a unified *Ecclesia*. The painting may thus be read as a polemical assertion on the part of the

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1077. Capretti, "La scultura," 330, 331, figs. 20, 21.

1078. "Would anyone dare to maintain that truth should stand there without any weapons in the hands of its defenders against falsehood...?" Augustine, Teaching Christianity, IV, 2, 3, 201; Gill, Augustine in the Italian Renaissance, 148.

1079. Gill, Augustine in the Italian Renaissance, 84-86 and fig. 31.

Santo Spirito Hermits of their order's orthodoxy in the face of internal deviations and external threats.<sup>1080</sup> The Nerli altarpiece, on the other hand, suggests a different inflection with respect to Augustinian identity. Rather like the classicizing frames around Gozzoli's polished vignettes of Augustine's life in San Gimignano, Filippino's painting stresses the worldliness of an order compelled to a *vita mixta* of contemplation and action.<sup>1081</sup> Here again, the Nerli altarpiece's classical carvings, inscribed within a Christian rhetorical argument, lend a polemical tone to the painting's defense of the Petrarchan *docta pietas* dear to the friars of Santo Spirito.

Given the Augustinian themes and the Augustinian self-fashioning recognizable in these paintings, can we speak, at Santo Spirito, of an Augustinian artistic practice? As Anne Dunlop has noted, one issue faced by art historians who would make such an argument is Augustine's own ambivalence about images and their relationship to the category of Truth.<sup>1082</sup> The Corbinelli Trinity specifically addresses that issue, proposing to the viewer both a prominently visible but also "false" pictorial sign--the Throne of Grace--and the invisible intimations of a conceptual *visio Dei*. In addition, as noted above, the iconographic structure of each of the paintings asserts the possibility of portraying in pictorial terms values important to Augustine--Wisdom, Peace, Charity, and Purity of Heart--all ideas that, Augustine believed, existed in the mind of God. If we can

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1080. Display oriented toward the assertion of identity, as here, has been fruitfully discussed in terms of Stephen Greenblatt's "artful" self-fashioning. Stephen Greenblatt, Renaissance Self-Fashioning from More to Shakespeare (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 2. Joanna Woods-Marsden, "Introduction: Collective Identity/Individual Identity," in Fashioning Identities in Renaissance Art, ed. Mary Rogers (Brookfield, VT: Ashgate, 2000), 1-15, 1.

1081. *Ibid.*, 81 and figs. 31 and 35.

1082. Augustine, City of God, IV, 31, 183. Anne Dunlop, "Introduction: the Augustinians, the Mendicant Orders, and Early-Renaissance Art," in Art and the Augustinian Order in Early Renaissance Italy, ed. Louise Bourdua and Anne Dunlop (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 1-15, 12-13.

trace a salient and consistent character in Augustinian spirituality that gave rise to these images, it may be the ease with which the friars translated the material into the conceptual, and the familiarity and vivid immediacy with which that world of values presented itself to them. At the same time, the paintings discussed here suggest that the Hermits, like Augustine, were acutely conscious of the powerful emotional impetus to spiritual understanding provided by “material signs,” and of the need to engage with the material to reach the spiritual. Indeed, this journey was perhaps most eloquently described by Augustine himself:

The presentation of truth through signs has great power to feed and fan that ardent love, by which ... we flicker upwards or inwards to our place of rest... When <the soul> is brought to material signs of spiritual realities, and moves from them to the things they represent, it gathers strength just by this very act of passing from the one to the other, like the flame of a torch, that burns all the more brightly as it moves.<sup>1083</sup>

Only further research can reveal whether the character of the altarpieces at Santo Spirito influenced the decoration of other churches of the Augustinian Hermits in Italy. However, a study by Gabriele Neher has revealed a similar effort to portray by means of independent church altarpieces values of importance to Augustine.<sup>1084</sup> In the 1540s, Alessandro Bonvicino, called Il Moretto, painted a series of large-scale altarpieces for the Augustinian Canons of San Giorgio in Alga, a congregation devoted to the Blessed Lorenzo Giustiniani and particularly concerned with issues of orthodoxy and ecclesiastical and scriptural authority. For their Brescian house at San Pietro in Oliveto, Moretto painted three altarpieces. One of these includes an aged Saint John the

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1083. Augustine, *Epistola* 55 11, 21, cited in Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967), 263.

1084. Gabriele Neher, “Moretto and the Congregation of S. Giorgio in Alga 1540-1550: Fashioning a visual identity of a religious Congregation,” (is the capitalizing correct?) in *Fashioning Identities*, 131–147.

Evangelist, pen in hand, and a female representation of Divine Wisdom who points up at the Madonna and Child in Glory. Her presence as an explicit allegory of Divine Wisdom, together with her gesture, recalls Botticelli's Christ Child, who also motions upward, referring the beholder to Mary-Ecclesia. The second altarpiece for the same church displays female allegories of Justice and Peace, shown loosely embracing and hands touching, between Saints Peter and Paul, who receive respectively keys and a tablet from a celestial figure. Here, as at Santo Spirito, the kiss of Justice and Peace is linked to orthodoxy and ecclesiastical unity. While we do not know whether the Brescian canons were directly influenced by works in the Florentine Augustinian church, the commonalities between the efforts at formulating a program are striking.

I hoped, in this dissertation, to suggest a few answers--derived from the study of works executed for one Augustinian house--to Anne Dunlop's broad question as to whether the Hermits had a "consistent policy" about art.<sup>1085</sup> The inclusion in Santo Spirito's sixteenth-century altarpieces of the forms, rhetorical strategies and embodied institutional ideals found in its fifteenth-century works may indicate that the Florentine friars believed that they had found a distinctive and compelling mode of expression. The limited Brescian program devoted to themes that were also of concern to the friars of Santo Spirito suggests that the Santo Spirito Hermits, like the Canons of San Pietro in Orto, had indeed endeavored to create a program. That program took the shape of pictorial narratives designed to illuminate the affective subjectivity of the beholder, and of rhetorical argument grounded in the writings of Augustine. Its purpose was to portray

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1084. Dunlop, "Introduction, the Augustinians," 13.

the constellation of values which, the Santo Spirito friars believed, lay at the heart of Augustine's legacy and of the order's institutional and spiritual mission.

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